The Unpopular Men of Popular Feminism:

Heteropessimistic feminisms in the era of the manosphere

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The University of Sydney

2025

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This research reported in this thesis was supported by the award of a Sydney University Postgraduate Scholarship.

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Finola Laughren
February 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like first to thank my supervisor, Professor Catherine Driscoll, for her intellectual guidance over the last four years. Thank you for reading and engaging with my work, and for helping me clarify my thoughts. Thank you also for reminding me to remove unnecessary embedded clauses—I will try.

Thank you to Dr. Jessica Kean, my auxiliary supervisor. Thank you for reading my work, but also for talking through conceptual knots with me. I have loved working alongside you at Courtyard Café.

Thank you to the Feminist Boys Studies Research team, whose members, along with Catherine and Jess, are: Dr. Prudence Black; Associate Professor Kellie Burns; Sarah Graham; Dr. Liam Grealy; Hannah Hayes; Dr. Grace Sharkey; Dr. Timothy Kazuo Steains; and, Dr. Shawna Tang.

I would like to thank the entire Discipline of Gender and Cultural Studies for fostering such an intellectually generous community. Special thanks to Professor Emeritus Meaghan Morris and Professor Emeritus Elspeth Probyn.

I would like to extend my warm hearted thanks to my GCS cuties: Dr. Francesca Ferrer-Best; Dr. James Gardiner; Dr. Jia Guo; Mila Heneck; Dr. Dongyang Li; Meihua Lu; and, Alice Weber. Thank you all for reading and/or chatting about my work, but more importantly for your kindness, care and solidarity.

Thank you to Dr. Beth Kearney for reading a draft chapter of this thesis, and for always being interested in my ideas. Other dear friends and comrades I would like to thank include Dr. David Brophy, Sophie Cotton, Zac Gillies-Palmer, Jordyn Beazley, Dr. Nick Riemer, Toyah Webb, Ruby Wawn, Jemimah Cooper, Lilia Anderson and Dr. Christian Gelder.

A big thank you also to the members of my Sydney family: Nic Avery; Dr. Anna Hush; Loukas Kakogiannis; Cam Lawrence; and, Lil' Finn. Doublehouse is so special to me. Thank you all for being just the right mixture of wholesome, politically principled, and debauched. Particular thanks to Anna for reading my work.

I would also like to thank my sisters Ella Austin, Isabelle FitzSimons-Reilly and Clare Scrine. And I would like to thank my Aunt Mary Laughren and my Godmother Terrie Kavanagh.

Finally, the most important thank you is to my dear parents, Therese Collie and Pat Laughren. Thank you for instilling in me my love of reading, and for always emphasising the value of curiosity. I dedicate this thesis to you.

A heavily supplemented form of the discussion of "orthodox" and "dissident" feminisms has previously been published as an article: Laughren, F. (2024). The unpopular (manosphere) men of popular feminism. *Continuum*, 1-16.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2024.2403559

Abstract

The latest battles between popular feminism and popular misogyny in Western culture have been characterised, since 2018, by spectacular expressions of misogyny enjoying institutional backing at the highest levels, and the emergence of popular feminisms that incorporate increasingly right-wing ideas and express a prevailing heteropessimism. Renewed attempts, including by feminists, to define "woman" solely in reproductive terms aligned with opposition to what is called "gender ideology" have gained traction across several continents (see Butler, 2024). Allied with "strong man" (and sometimes, strong woman) politics, and part of a broad network of "reactionary digital politics," misogyny currently exerts considerable influence over the terrain of popular culture (see Butler, 2024; Cappelle, 2024; Finlayson, 2021; 2022; Kay, 2024). This thesis examines how popular feminism is contributing to this changing context and how it too has changed in recent decades.

This thesis examines the representational politics of a range of cultural phenomena, including online masculinist communities known as the "manosphere," transphobic feminists, and histories of Western radical feminisms. It evaluates how the rightward cultural shift I sketched above is imbricated with the emergence of two distinct modes of popular feminism, which I call "orthodox" and "dissident." While orthodox feminism represents men as patriarchal threats to the realisation of a feminist social order and dissident feminism represents men as natural threats to women, both feminisms draw conclusions about "man" as a social category by citing examples from the manosphere. This shared field of reference, I argue, is both symptomatic of, and has a limiting impact on, the affects towards men—and therefore, the politics— that are readily intelligible in and as "feminism."

Popular feminism is currently stuck in a counterproductive heteropessimistic cycle in which popular misogyny exacerbates gendered antagonisms. This thesis proposes that looking back at radical feminism, especially of the 1970s, might help resolve this quandary by demonstrating the limits of feminist strategies that exalt the morality of "woman" and despair about "man" at the expense of more productive politics. Historicising Western popular feminism in this way reveals the importance of context to feminist practice, and the fact that both orthodox and dissident feminisms in the present reiterate tendencies found in feminist pasts. This is politically pressing if it can provide contemporary feminists with an imperative to turn away from a politics of identity towards a politics of affinity.

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Introduction:

Girls vs boys

> Myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth.
>
> — Doris Lessing, *African Laughter*

Introduction

In Sydney, Australia, at around 6:30 pm on the 6th of November, 2024, I'm watching the Australian Broadcast Corporation's (ABC) coverage of Donald Trump's presidential campaign party in Florida. Having convincingly won the United States (US) election, Trump takes to the stage to deliver his victory speech. My fellow-millennial housemates and I are messaging each other about it on Facebook.

> Anna: "I can't believe Elon Musk, Dana White, Joe Rogan and Trump won the election
> What a country"
>
> Lionel: "I was thinking about this today
> Kamala had Beyoncé and Taylor Swift
> Trump had Joe Rogan and Elon Musk
> The voting gender divide was massive
> It really was Girls vs boys"

Girls vs boys.

As a phrase, "Girls vs boys" immediately evokes, for me, images of playing lunchtime sports at school, especially tiggy. Yet this thesis suggests "Girls vs boys" might also name a fairly fitting, if vernacular, description of the paradigm through which important popular modes of

"Western" feminism continue to ask and answer questions about sexual difference, about gendered capacity and injury, and about male violence.[1]

Since the election, this idea has stayed with me as media coverage has fixated on this (reductive) explanation of Trump's victory. It's true that "in the 18-29 age group, 58% of women voted for Harris, while 56% of men voted for Trump" (Morgan, 2024). It's also true that while Democratic candidate Kamala Harris received endorsements from men as well as women—including from a group of voters called "White Dudes for Harris" (2024)—throughout her campaign, she was framed by supporters as both a defender of women's rights, notably in the context of reproductive healthcare, and as a general symbol of social progress, exemplified by her oft-repeated slogan, "We are not going back" (as cited in Smith, 2024). Having "learnt" from Hillary Clinton's failed 2016 bid for president not to explicitly mention the "F" word, though, it was a disarticulated feminism, as Angela McRobbie (2009) might call it, that served as the (literally) unspoken backdrop to Harris's campaign. Trump, by contrast, in an indication that this is what "real men" do, asserted that whether women "like it or not", he was going to be their "protector" once elected (as cited in Helmore, 2024). And although Harris enjoyed much more support in legacy media, this ultimately proved inconsequential because Trump actively and successfully cultivated votes from men, particularly young men, appearing on podcasts like: *The Tucker Carlson Show*; *This Past Weekend with Theo Von; The Joe Rogan Experience; The Nelk Boys;* and *IMPAULSIVE* (YouTuber Logan Paul's podcast); and on gamer Adin Ross's livestream (see Alba et al., 2025; Stieb, 2024).

As Lionel mentioned in our group chat, Harris was endorsed by Beyoncé and Taylor Swift–two of the world's most famous women–among other female celebrities. It is also

[1] Throughout this thesis I will refer to these modes of feminism as Western. Although "Western" and "the West" give only a rough coherence to any set of sociocultural contexts, what I mean by this is well-recognised (see Hall, 1992a). I use this shorthand to refer to ideas, concepts and norms that get circumscribed, rightly and often wrongly, as features of "liberal democratic" or "advanced capitalist" societies.

relevant that these famous *women* publicly identify as *feminists*. In her 2013 song "Flawless," Beyoncé sampled Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's definition of feminist as "a person who believes in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes" and, at the 2014 VMAs, performed in front of a giant neon sign that spelt out "FEMINIST" in all caps (see Valenti, 2014). Swift likewise had a "feminist awakening" in 2014, claiming in a *Guardian* interview that until then she had been under the wrong impression that feminism meant hating men (as cited in Hoby, 2024). In her words:

> As a teenager, I didn't understand that saying you're a feminist is just saying that you hope women and men will have equal rights and equal opportunities. What it seemed to me, the way it was phrased in culture, society, was that you hate men. And now, I think a lot of girls have had a feminist awakening because they understand what the word means. For so long it's been made to seem like something where you'd picket against the opposite sex, whereas it's not about that at all. (Swift as cited in Hoby, 2014)

Despite these statements from Swift and Beyoncé to the contrary, since 2014 the perception that feminism and man-hating are connected—if not synonyms—has arguably increased, at least among men, with a more specific instantiation of the anxiety over polarization and social division manifesting as anxiety over political divergence between men and women (see Morgan, 2024; Omer, 2024). According to this narrative, men in the West are becoming more right-wing, while women are increasingly left-wing (see Chowdhury, 2024; Demsas, 2024; Ough, 2024). Across this thesis I will consider how anxiety about boys and men finds common expression in criticism of the "manosphere" understood as a loose conglomeration of online masculinist communities in which the figures listed above are popular celebrities alongside other well-known voices like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate. More broadly, the manosphere includes visible self-identified collectives of far less famous men, including involuntary celibates (incels), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and men's rights activists (MRAs). In this contemporary restaging of debates that proliferated in

the West during the 1980s and 90s, it is often suggested that the manosphere is responsible for a masculinist backlash against hard won feminist gains or, by those who view it positively, as a core part of why men are becoming more alive to the feminist lies embedded in dominant social narratives, able to see them for the ideological veils they "truly" are (see Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Depending on who you ask, in fact, the manosphere is: an inevitable result of what you get when you mix capitalist alienation with patriarchy; an underground creative movement likely to join the tradition of great thinkers revered by future generations, not their own; vile misogynists who pose a real, off-line terrorist threat; an overblown ideological construction of liberal moral panic; or simply, romantically unsuccessful men in need of some guidance.[2] Despite this variation, as I will argue in chapter one, what I call "critical" representations of the manosphere generally assume its influence over men's politics, especially young men's politics, and especially young men's gendered politics.

If 2014 had an "irrefutably feminist" zeitgeist, as Jessica Valenti claimed at the time, this thesis considers how the relationship between "popular feminism" and "popular misogyny" has changed ten years on. Trump and his politics are strongly associated with the manosphere, an association which, as mentioned above, is part of how he cultivates his male "voter base" (see Alba et al., 2025). It is relevant to this association that he has a string of sexual misconduct allegations against him and a record of making sexist comments about women, including the infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment revealed during the 2016 presidential campaign (as cited in Friedersdorf, 2016). In a sign of the heteropessimistic times, the visibility of these facts did not impede Trump winning both the 2024 US presidency and the popular vote. This thesis examines the heteropessimism of popular misogyny and popular feminism across several sites of Western cultural production including forms of digital media like Twitter/X, podcasts and YouTube channels, but also popular feminist trade books, academic texts and pamphlets.

[2] See, for example, Copland, 2021; Ging, 2019; Gosálvez, 2022; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Haslop et al., 2024; Jane, 2018; Johanssen, 2021; Jones et al., 2020; Kelly & Aunspach, 2020; Lopes, 2023; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; O'Neill, 2015, 2018; Sharkey, 2022; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022.

"Heteropessimism" is a term I take from Asa Seresin's (2019) discussion of the paradoxical practice of feeling disappointment, embarrassment or even despair about current forms of heterosexual relationships, especially about being in one, coupled with an inability to imagine heterosexuality as anything but irredeemable. For Seresin, heteropessimism involves performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality that ironically express profound attachments to heterosexual life worlds, and which serve to further entrench rather than decrease the normative force of heterosexuality (see Johanssen & Kay, 2024, p. 7). While Seresin's heteropessimism is an affective defense mechanism designed to guard against suffering associated with heterosexuality, I adapt the term in this thesis to capture a wider range of feminist politics, including what I am calling "dissident feminism," which has an unironic attachment to heterosexuality. I will argue that dissident feminism, although often proudly extolling heterosexuality, evinces heteropessimism to the extent that it provides nothing other than an extremely narrow image of relations between men and women, which I read as a form of "giving up." Building on scholars such as Jacob Johanssen and Jilly Boyce Kay, I am interested in how "the widespread mood of 'giving up' that is increasingly entwined with, and expressed through, the radicalisation of negative heterosexual experience" takes shape in popular modes of Western misogyny and feminism (2024, p. 2). This thesis investigates the heteropessimism of the manosphere, the paradigmatic manifestation of popular misogyny, and delineates between two emerging modes of popular feminism for which I argue heteropessimism is a central feature, which I am labelling "orthodox" and "dissident." This thesis also contextualises contemporary heteropessimism by demonstrating its historical precedence in a range of radical feminist positions taken towards the "man" throughout the late 1960s-1980s, especially by those dubbed "cultural feminists." One of the majorly scholarly conversations to which I contribute with this discussion concerns the relationship between how feminists represent men, masculinity and misogyny, and broader cultural understandings of what it means to *be* a feminist, to *feel* feminist and to *do* feminist politics.

I am far from the first to consider popular feminism and its discontents. Four years on from 2014, Sarah Banet-Weiser published *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular*

Misogyny (2018), consolidating the popularity (no pun intended) of the term. She also started writing a bi-monthly column on popular feminism for the *LA Review of Books* the same year, the final installment of which came out in 2020. Banet-Weiser uses "popular feminism" as a keyword in Raymond Williams's sense—as shorthand for the kinds of feminisms that enjoy high-visibility in Western media circuits. Influenced by Stuart Hall, Banet-Weiser uses popular feminism as a framework for examining how "a technological and economic context devoted to the accumulation of views, clicks, 'likes,' etcetera" facilitates the visibility and therefore popularity of *certain* claims made under the banner of "feminism" at the expense of others (2018, p. 2). She argues that

> in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers, individualised claims of empowerment, confidence, capacity and competence are foregrounded at the expense of expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 4, 11, 18)

According to Banet-Weiser, there is usually an inverse relationship between how much of a challenge any feminist politics poses to the status quo, and how popular it is. Although her bi-monthly column evinces an investment in, and commitment to, struggling in and on the terrain of popular culture, Banet-Weiser remains sceptical about the politics of visibility:

> Popular feminism is part of the larger "attention" economy, where its sheer accessibility—through shared images, likes, clicks, followers, retweets, and the like—is a key component of its success. Popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorizes it to create ever-increasing visibility. Visibility is not a static thing; it has to be in a constant state of growth, which can become an end unto itself. But simply *becoming* visible does not usher in sweeping change. Visibility is at best a tool for social change, not an end. (2018, pp. 10-11)

As well as exploring visibility scuffles *among* feminisms, Banet-Weiser identifies a call and response *between* popular feminism and "popular misogyny," which, "networked" across various social, economic, political and technological registers, finds paradigmatic expression for its attachment to a zero-sum understanding of gendered relations in the manosphere. She describes popular misogyny as follows:

> There is clearly a relationship between the creation and expression of popular feminism and what I began to call "popular misogyny." Misogyny is popular in the contemporary moment for the same reasons feminism has become popular: it is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms, it attracts other like-minded groups and individuals, and it manifests in a terrain of struggle, with competing demands for power. For me, popular misogyny in some ways follows a conventional definition of misogyny: a hatred of women. But I also want to make a more nuanced case for popular misogyny: it is the instrumentalization of women as objects, where women are a means to an end: a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2)

These arguments are a touchstone for this thesis, which from one angle might be read as an extension of Banet-Weiser's argument. Yet there are several differences between our accounts shaped by recent developments. In *Empowered* (2018, p. 4), Banet-Weiser argues that there is an important difference between popular feminism and popular misogyny. This is despite the fact that

> both popular feminism and popular misogyny tap into a neoliberal notion of individual capacity (for work, for confidence, for economic success) … both also position injury—for women, the injury of sexism; for men, the injury of feminism and "multiculturalism"—as a key obstacle to realizing this capacity. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4)

The difference here, according to Banet-Weiser, is that popular feminism exerts an active influence over the terrain of popular culture, while popular misogyny exerts a reactive influence, striving more to limit the influence of popular feminism than to generate "new" gendered norms (2018, pp. 2-3). It is important to note that "reactive" for Banet-Weiser does not mean *less* influence but relates to the fact that popular misogyny, aligned as it is with the status quo or "way things are," primarily reacts *against* popular feminist attempts to gain more influence over culture (2018, p. 3). While popular misogyny continues to react against feminism, this thesis suggests that the consolidation of institutional formations for which misogyny is a central organising principle, in conjunction with the rapid circulation of information and imagery, has led to a situation where popular feminism is now often forced to react against ever-more spectacular and emboldened expressions of popular misogyny. This is to say, the increasing influence of popular misogyny has made it more difficult to discern the "active" from the "reactive." Numerous events demonstrate the increasing power of popular misogyny including, to stay with the US for now, the fact that in June 2022, the Supreme Court voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, meaning that women do not currently have the right to abortion enshrined in the federal constitution (see Totenberg & McCammon, 2022). Other obvious examples would include the over-correction to #MeToo that transpired during Johnny Depp's successful defamation case against his ex-wife, Amber Heard, coming in the form of, as Zora Simic puts it, "a toxic mix of celebrity worship, latent and unabashed misogyny, trial-by-media and victim-blaming" (2022, p. 144; see also Donegan, 2022; Lake, 2022).

Thinking through the influence of popular misogyny is also complicated by the fact that the changing field of media technologies has contributed to a further breakdown in the meanings of "left" and "right" that were held largely in place in the West since English political debates in the nineteenth century through to at least the late twentieth century. According to this long dominant paradigm, the influence of various socialist traditions positioned a political actor, institution or discourse as "left," and antagonists to those social traditions, therefore, as

"right" (see Bennett et al., 2013, pp. 55-56). Alan Finlayson (2021; 2022; 2023) argues that "reactionary digital politics" in the twenty-first century encompasses the conservative far right, but also extends to certain kinds of neoliberal and libertarian politics. Although a very broad coalition, reactionary digital politics nevertheless has several defining features. Its primary goal is to get people to react *against* something–whether that be liberalism, immigration, feminism, trans people or, as tends to be the case for men involved with the manosphere, some combination of these (see also Johanssen & Kay, 2024). Proponents of reactionary digital politics are not content on *limiting* progress, as has often been the goal of conservative movements, but rather wholesale reject the enlightenment ideas of liberalism, of progress and finally, of equality—generally through recourse to some conception of "natural inequality" (Finlayson, 2021, p. 183). Ironically, then, the manosphere's *reactionary* nature is part of why popular misogyny is no longer simply *reactive*. Reactionary digital politics as defined by Finlayson is manifested particularly and primarily through online forums and platforms, and these forms of audiovisual media have an impact on how proponents of reactionary digital politics make their arguments, which is to say, how they try to entice people to their causes. Social media and the rapid circulation of images place emphasis on political leaders, for example—or "ideological entrepreneurs" (2021, p. 167) as Finlayson calls them—who become the visual embodiment of their politics. (Trump is the exemplar par excellence of an ideological entrepreneur.) Reactionary digital politics is also a politics in the sense that, according to Finlayson, it is strategic, conscious and at least somewhat organised.

Although a strict fidelity to fixed notions of "left" and "right" may be untenable, these terms continue to be useful for an analysis of how heteropessimism is reiterated in popular modes of Western misogyny and feminism. The fact that a growing trend of transphobic feminists, themselves an active faction within reactionary digital politics, argue for getting rid of the left/right distinction (see Lawford-Smith, forthcoming; Perry, 2020) would be enough to give me pause about abandoning the terms. Moreover, "left" and "right" are terms widely used to draw political lines, and they help clarify distinctions between the heteropessimism of the manosphere, the heteropessimism of orthodox feminism and the heteropessimism of

dissident feminism. In particular, it foregrounds how orthodox feminism, aligned with the "left," overlaps with popular misogyny while dissident feminism, critical of "the left," declares an alignment with the manosphere. While men involved in the manosphere claim that men are the main victims of contemporary sexual politics in the West, dissident feminists and orthodox feminists continue to insist that women suffer more. As I will unpack, however, dissident feminists consider orthodox feminism to be partly responsible for both women's and men's suffering. Indeed, it is their critique of "liberal" or "progressive" feminists that leads dissident feminists not only to express sympathy for men, but also to have begun to form something of an alliance with the manosphere. For their part, orthodox feminists are largely sceptical of the political effects of extending sympathy to men, a scepticism exemplified by Kate Manne's term for the excessive sympathy that a patriarchal social environment affords misogynistic men: "himpathy" (2017, p. 197). To make sense of these feminist disarticulations and contradictions, throughout this thesis I return to the respective works of Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill to elucidate the entanglements, and strategic and simultaneous deployments of progressive and regressive ideas in several sites of Western cultural production. In this thesis, then, as well as noting where these terms are used by the voices and communities I am studying, I will use "left" when referring to politics that articulate ideas that have traces in Anglophone socialist traditions from the nineteenth century, and "right" to refer to their antagonists (see Bennett et al., 2013, pp. 55-56).

Trump's reelection was not simply the result of popular misogyny—more on this in a moment—but it does also indicate some of the power misogyny currently enjoys. During his second presidential campaign, Trump deployed profoundly gendered rhetoric, and extended the reach and profile of misogyny, racism and transphobia, partly by publicly associating with famous figures of the manosphere: Elon Musk, the richest person in the world and owner of X (formerly known as Twitter); Theo Von, stand-up podcaster and comedian; Tucker Carlson, podcaster and political commentator; Joe Rogan, podcaster and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) commentator; and Dana White, UFC president (see Alba et al., 2025; Smith, 2025; Zidan, 2024). It is noteworthy that these latter two of these figures are formally

involved with the UFC, a sport which has been criticised for glorifying violent masculinity and was initially even banned in some US states, with former Republican Senator John McCain once describing it as "human cockfighting" (as cited in Greene, 2018). Increasingly popular and still controversial, UFC involves two people fighting each other in a ring, with the goal being to knock the other person unconscious or, failing that, to inflict as much bodily damage as possible, within certain fairly lax parameters. Trump has been mythologised as integral to the mainstream success of UFC, and he is something of a hero in the UFC community, its fighters as much as its overwhelmingly male fan base (see Zidan, 2024, para. 4). Trump does not mobilise misogyny only as rhetorical flair or through his associates. Misogyny lies rather at the core of his policy platform. The flip side of his claim about protecting women whether they "like it or not," for example, is an attempt to define women solely in reproductive terms. This is imbricated with an attack on the LGBTIQA+* community, especially trans people, and especially trans women. Trump has stated several times that he intends to repeal hard-fought-for trans rights in educational, healthcare and sporting settings, for example, pledging throughout his campaign that on day one of his presidency he would stop what he calls "the transgender lunacy" (as cited in Le Monde & AFP, 2024). In Trump's transphobic words:

> We will keep men out of women's sports, ban Taxpayer funding for sex change surgeries, and stop Taxpayer-funded Schools from promoting gender transition, reverse Biden's radical rewrite of Title IX Education Regulations, and restore protections for women and girls. (as cited in Martin, 2024)

With Trump and his allies back in the oval office and movements against "gender ideology" gaining traction across several continents in the form of strong man (and sometimes, strong woman) politics, popular misogyny can be seen to exert far greater influence than seeking to limit the influence of popular feminism. Judith Butler assesses this influence in *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, arguing that

> gender is figured not only as a threat to children, national security, or heterosexual marriage and the normative family but also as a plot by elites to impose their cultural
>
> values on "real people," a scheme for colonizing the Global South by the urban centers of the Global North. (2024, p. 5)

While popular feminism of the kind Banet-Weiser has so aptly described might have held a more active influence over the terrain of popular culture than popular misogyny in the mid twenty-teens, this is not the current situation. In terms of reach and mode of engagement, in fact, it is arguably now the other way around (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 2-3).

This raises questions about what kind of power such popular misogyny enjoys. One common feminist explanation for Trump's reelection is that it is yet another indication of the fact that men simply do not care about women. In an updated version of Germaine Greer's famous line from *The Female Eunuch* (1970) that "women have very little idea of how much men hate them," a day after the election Kate Manne (2024) published a piece entitled, "America's Violent Indifference toward Women" with the subheading "A meditation on the realization that girls and women are fundamentally uncared for in this country." But misogyny is only part of why Trump was reelected. Seeing everything through the prism of gender obscures many other factors that contributed to his reelection and the assumption that matters of gender can and should be privileged and isolated as more important than all other factors has the counterproductive effect of positioning huge swathes of people—huge swathes of men, in particular—as bluntly antagonistic to feminism. Far from just an indication that the West is misogynistic, a non-exhaustive list of reasons why Trump won the US election might include: the Democrats' role in Israel's assault on Gaza, which for many people was a red-line issue (see Malik, 2024); the fact that cost-of-living has continued to increase under the Democrats, precipitating a wide-spread loss of faith in so-called "free-trade" arrangements, which makes Trump's rhetoric about tariffs and domestic jobs appealing (see Harvey, 2024); and anti-immigration sentiment fuelled by racist anxieties of Americans losing their way of life and, in

particular, their jobs, to violent, undeserving, illegal "others" (see Mukherjee & Krogstad, 2024). Trump's electoral strategy and the popular feminist response to his reelection described above not only demonstrate that, as Banet-Weiser has shown us, popular misogyny dehumanises and objectifies women, using them to trade for some other "commodity" (2018, p. 2). They also express the popularity, among proponents of popular misogyny and popular feminism alike, of the idea that men's role in feminism is exclusively that of antagonistic.

Holding up to critical scrutiny the way a feminist tendency to slide metonymically from "manosphere" to "man" reinforces a counterproductive heteropessimism, this thesis makes a contribution to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to complicate feminist thinking about boys and men by questioning their default positioning as opposed to the goals of feminism (see Driscoll et al., 2021; Kean & Steins, 2021; Laurie et al., 2021; Tang, 2021). In their work on feminist imaginings of boys and boyhoods, Catherine Driscoll et al. (2021) describe their approach as follows:

> This approach does not mean finding only or more positive things to say about boys, but it does involve imagining boys in more complex ways, with careful attention to their lived contexts and diversity. It involves resisting the urge to reduce boys to sites for the reproduction of, or intervention in, patriarchal power, in favour of seeking opportunities for productive feminist engagement with boys and for boys. (pp. 2-3)

This approach informs the positions I take towards men, masculinity and misogyny throughout this thesis and highlights another scholarly conversation to which this thesis contributes. Popular misogyny is increasingly central in feminist understandings of what it means to be a man. I do not wish to minimise the misogyny expressed by men involved in the manosphere–far from it. However, I am sceptical about the political effects of drawing conclusions about "man" as a general social category by citing examples from the misogynistic figures and groups that make up the manosphere. My concern is that this leads to reductive explanations, reinforcing heteropessimism and naturalising misogyny. It is crucial for any

feminist politics of hope that we acknowledge that not all men are men of the manosphere. It is thus because of my critique of misogyny that I scrutinise a too-common feminist choice to draw conclusions about men from what seem to me particularly pernicious expressions of "aggrieved entitlement" (to borrow Michael Kimmel's term) (2013). In this regard, I align with some tendencies of recent studies of men and masculinity research, which as Timothy Laurie et al. note "does not work toward a unifying conception of what men should be" (2021, p. 75). Masculinity studies is often identified with sociological work by scholars like R.W. Connell (2005), Jeff Hearn (2019), James Messerschmidt and Michael Messner (2018). Laurie et al. claim that the core strength of Connell's famous oeuvre is not that she convincingly elucidates a masculine subjectivity capable of anchoring masculinity studies but rather that she "shows so clearly why the desire to homogenize masculinities or masculinity politics is itself part of the problem" (2021, p. 76).

Alive to the inevitability of cultural shifts, Banet-Weiser's *Empowered* (2018) not only intimates that a role reversal between popular feminism and popular misogyny may eventually occur, but also emphasises that their call and response relationship is more complex than it might seem at first glance. She is well aware, for example, that more extreme and outlandish expressions of popular misogyny allow less overt forms of misogyny to appear more reasonable, arguing that "when misogyny is extreme and read as an anomaly, as an unfortunate expression of a few deranged individuals, this works to validate and render invisible the other, less obvious ways it works as a norm" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 36; see also Manne, 2017). Less "spectacular" expressions of misogyny are harder to identify *as* misogyny because, by cultivating outrage and capturing public attention, popular misogyny affects what people expect "misogyny" to look like. Popular misogyny exerts power not just on the level of "cultural representation," crudely and thinly understood, but also contributes to cultivating social conditions that facilitate rightward cultural shifts. This is to say, while popular misogyny circulates online, it is also

> reified in institutional structures: the workplace (unequal pay, sexual harassment, glass ceilings); organized religions (many of which continue to denigrate women); state politics (where women remain in the vast minority, and, as we have seen in the Trump administration, are often interrupted, diminished, and outright silenced). (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 5)

Reactive though its influence might be, according to Banet-Weiser popular misogyny nevertheless wields profound institutional power. It is

> a deeply embedded networked context, one that structures not only the material world of law, policy, and regulation but also identity, affect, and sexuality. Among other things, it is a reactive response to popular feminism; a waging of battle, a call to arms. *This does not end with one round; both feminism and misogyny are continually restructured through this dynamic* [emphasis added]. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 37)

In the latest "round" of the battle between popular feminism and popular misogyny, spectacular expressions of misogyny enjoy institutional backing at the highest levels, and popular feminisms increasingly incorporate right-wing ideas. I thus also take both popular feminism and popular misogyny as keywords that help elucidate contemporary processes of cultural change. Like Banet-Weiser, I choose the term "keywords" advisedly. As Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris note in their Introduction to *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* when Williams wrote about "keywords," "the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social, and economic situations and needs" (2005, p. xvii). In taking popular feminism and popular misogyny as keywords in this sense, this thesis examines how the relationship between them is changing and how this relates to a broader set of changing situations–to what Hall and writers after Hall would call a "present conjuncture" (e.g., 1992b, pp. 83-90). I have set out to explore the increasing influence of popular misogyny on the terrain of popular culture and the relationship between this discursive and institutional

power and emerging modes of popular feminism.

Kay (2024) argues that we are currently witnessing a reactionary turn in Western popular feminism that requires feminist cultural and media studies to revise its terms (as Williams might say). There is now, for example, greater space on the terrain of Western popular culture for transphobic feminisms. This is particularly visible in Britain, which has been dubbed "TERF Island" by Sophie Lewis (2025) because of a concentration of transphobic feminist figures in Britain, including Julie Bindel, Kathleen Stock and Helen Joyce, working alongside those whom I group, in chapter four, as "dissident feminists"—Nina Power, Louise Perry and Mary Harrington (see also Faye, 2021; Gill-Peterson, 2024; Serano, 2016). Transphobic feminisms enjoy high-visibility across Western culture, with the most high-profile Australian representative being Holly Lawford-Smith (see Le Grand, 2023). Employing similar strategies to manosphere figures like Peterson and Tate (and, for that matter, Trump), transphobic feminists seek to increase their profiles by cultivating controversy and then positioning themselves as victims of anti-free speech censorship (see Pearce et al., 2020). As well as publicly supporting and boosting each other's profiles, these transphobic feminists contribute to and participate in broader right-wing networks of cultural production that span genres including books, podcasts, YouTube channels, online journals, blogs and tweets. In chapter four, I will justify my choice to distinguish Power, Perry and Harrington from other feminists that I will mostly describe as "trans-exclusionary." By this term, I mean feminists and feminisms that are not supportive, for various reasons, of the inclusion of trans women in feminist politics (see Hines, 2020). While most feminists are in some important sense "gender critical," feminists who wish to exclude trans women often label themselves "gender critical" to underscore what they see as the importance of campaigning for "sex-based rights" (see Stock, 2021).

Kay (2024) locates what she calls "reactionary feminism" within a "broader turn to openly rejecting 'liberal,' 'progressive,' or 'girlboss' feminisms within popular and political

culture," arguing that "this phenomenon may seem to resemble feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism, but is based upon a rejection of social justice, a deep and transphobic bioessentialism, and hostility to liberationist feminism" (p. 2). She groups a variety of cultural "content" into her category of reactionary feminism, including "post-liberal" feminists (which she identifies with Perry and Harrington) and the "femosphere," especially the "Female Dating Strategy" and "dark feminine" dating influencers, who, she points out, are "sometimes framed as 'Andrew Tate for girls'" (Kay, 2024, p. 1). I adopt a similar perspective in this thesis, although my specific focus is on how the heteropessimism and popular misogyny of the manosphere is both inadvertently and explicitly reiterated in claims made in the name of "feminism." I argue that what I call "orthodox feminism" expresses the heteropessimism of our moment by articulating gendered antagonisms in progressive and intersectional feminist terms. This is distinguished from what I call "dissident feminism," which expresses heteropessimism by identifying "liberalism" as the cause of gendered antagonisms, and then proposing a return to "sex-realism" as the solution (see Power, 2022; Perry, 2022a; Harrington, 2023a). This thesis evaluates these emerging modes of popular feminism. I suggest that dissident feminism is the feminist "part" of reactionary digital politics and explicitly shares tenets of popular misogyny, while orthodox feminism evinces a despair about men that inadvertently reinforces heteropessimism and the influence of popular misogyny.

The central significance of this thesis lies in elucidating connections between Western modes of popular misogyny and popular feminism, and heteropessimistic notions of inherent antagonism between men and women. Examining the representational politics of a range of cultural phenomena, including the manosphere, transphobic feminism, and the history of Western radical feminism, I suggest that radical feminist positions taken towards the "man" are useful for making sense of the despair about men found in "orthodox" and "dissident" feminisms. I argue that orthodox feminism represents men as patriarchal threats to the realisation of a feminist social order and dissident feminism represents men as natural threats to women. Despite this difference, both draw conclusions about "man" as a social category, partly by citing examples from the manosphere. In my reading, this shared feature is

symptomatic of, and has itself a limiting impact on, the affects towards men and the politics that are readily intelligible in and as "feminism." A central claim of this thesis is that popular feminism is stuck in a counterproductive heteropessimistic cycle with popular misogyny, which is contributing to a rightward shift in gendered relations. Another central claim is that looking back at radical feminism, especially of the 1970s, might help to resolve this quandary by demonstrating the limits of feminist strategies that exalt the morality of "woman" and bemoan the immorality of "man" at the expense of more productive politics. Historicising Western popular feminism reveals the importance of context to feminist practice and provides a framework through which to understand the heteropessimism of orthodox and dissident feminisms.

As this thesis builds on Banet-Weiser's work, it is also indebted to the intellectual lineage that she herself extends—in particular the expansive scholarship on "post-feminism."[3] Feminist cultural and media studies has, at least since the 1980s, been interested in how institutional formations serve to delimit the kinds of femininities and feminist expressions that circulate widely within a given context and across different contexts. My discussion of heteropessimism is thus also indebted to Rosalind Gill's work on a "postfeminist sensibility." Indeed, in light of her work, I am treating heteropessimism here as something akin to a sensibility after Gill's work. Gill (2007, 2017) turns razor-sharp attention to the "patterned contradictions" expressed by neoliberal gendered relations. In an article co-authored with Banet-Weiser and Catherine Rottenberg, Gill (2020) clarified that postfeminism is not a

[3] See, for example, Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015; Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Guo, 2022; Gill, 2007, 2008, 2016, 2017, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2015; Negra & Hamad, 2020; Henderson & Taylor, 2019; Kay, 2020, 2024; Kanai, 2017, 2019; Loxham, 2023; McRobbie, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Orgad & Gill, 2022; Rottenberg, 2018; Taylor, 2012.

signifier for the historical moment following second-wave feminism, not a conceptual shorthand for a new kind of feminism informed by post-structuralism and post-colonialism, and not a referent for an anti-feminist backlash (p. 5). Conceived in the first instance to remedy the lack of conceptual clarity around these competing definitions, Gill's postfeminist sensibility is first and foremost a "critical object." Rather than a framework through which she analyses culture, this sensibility is Gill's object of analysis. Concerned with more than just the linguistic elements of culture, Gill's postfeminist sensibility is not an ideology, a discourse or a regime but a means of exploring postfeminist "ideas, images and meanings" not only through language but also through "notions of affect, public mood, atmosphere" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 5).

Since the initial works of Gill and Angela McRobbie, for whom post-feminism involves a simultaneous incorporation and disavowal of feminism, scholars working in this field have sought to further specify, which is to say, further contextualise, post-feminism. Along with Justine Ashby (2005), Gill and McRobbie have both themselves emphasised cultural specificity, as have scholars working in Australia been exemplary in this regard. Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll have described postfeminism as a productive irritation:

> While the inconsistency and uncertainty surrounding postfeminism might ground an argument for setting the concept aside as just too unclear to be useful, the idea keeps returning precisely because of this lack of clarity. We want to suggest here that postfeminism is one word for a productive irritation that helps keep feminist discourse alive in contemporary popular culture. (2015, p. 253)

Margaret Henderson and Anthea Taylor have demonstrated the limitations of over-zealously applying "post-feminism" to this or that context, without attending to the fact that contexts shape concepts as much as the other way around (2019, pp. 3-4). And Jia Guo (2022) has compellingly argued that post-feminism itself transforms, becomes a different frame, when

thought in and for the Chinese context. Outside of Australia, Jess Butler (2013) and Simidele Doeskun (2015) have each challenged the idea that postfeminism only applies to "white" or "Western" girls. Much work has demonstrated the value of fine-grained attention to the meanings that distinctive social groups generate through their responses to embodied and embedded conditions of existence, and the fact that context is not a synonym for nation-state is especially evident in our so-called "digital age." My focus in this thesis is on how certain feminisms are gaining popularity and calcifying into the common sense (as opposed to Gramsci's "good sense") of our moment, and how ideas that also circulate in right-wing networks are becoming part of dominant understandings of feminism (see Hall, 1979). Context matters to this, and despite my references to US political and popular culture and to politics of British feminism above, I have written this thesis in an Australian context, a fact that calls for some reflection here.

In this thesis I examine popular and scholarly feminist discourses produced by Australians, but I deliberately engage with scholars working across the West. By reading across local and international "scenes," I elucidate broad patterns in Western popular feminist culture, and also adhere to a tradition in Australian feminism. Australian feminisms and feminists have always engaged extensively with feminist scholarship from the Global North, especially the US and the UK (and France). This is not simply a product of what is known here in Australia as "cultural cringe" (see Phillips, 2016). Connell calls it the problem of "extraversion" and suggests that this has obscured Australian scholars from grappling with the specificities of Australia's "situation" (2014, p. 224). A flaw from one angle maybe, the fact that Australian feminism is always in dialogue with feminisms from "elsewhere" can also be seen as a strength. As Ann Curthoys points out, "feminisms in Australia have been continually affected by the critiques and perspectives of elsewhere, as Australia continues to be a site for migration, from most parts of the world, and for many diasporic communities" (1996, p. viii).

While Australian feminisms and feminists can be said to reproduce global power

hierarchies—through their citational practices, for example—this is only part of the story. Feminist scholars working in and on Australian feminism have, at least since the 1970s, considered how Australia's "situation" as a sparsely populated, predominantly English-speaking former English colony located in the Asia-Pacific with a strong allegiance to the United States renders Australian feminisms unique in many respects. This includes, to give just a few examples, the institutional power that feminists were able to wield through the so-called "femocrat" strategy, the effects of policies of multiculturalism and, of course, the violent history of dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (see Ang, 1996; Behrendt, 1995; Eisenstein, 1996; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Australian feminisms and feminists have had an ambivalent relationship with struggles for Aboriginal justice and, partly for this reason, have sought to grapple, with varying levels of sensitivity, with the mutually constitutive nature of race and gender (see Ahmed, 2013). As Leigh Boucher et al. have recently argued, for example,

> Questions of gender and sexuality were and are central to the project of dispossession, which aims to replace a racialised population of First Nations inhabitants with an endlessly reproducing settler nation. The white heterosexual family was always an instrument of dispossession: the Australian state privileged its reproductive mission through regimes of citizenship that demanded maternity from white Australian women while attempting to either deny maternity to First Nations women, governing their children in ways that either foreclosed the possibility of a First Nations political future, or demanded normative family formation. (2024, p. 18)

Australian feminisms and feminists are an important intellectual resource throughout this thesis, including for my critical evaluation of the racial politics undergirding dissident feminist claims about the need to revalue "the family."

It might already be clear that this thesis centrally works through critical discourse

analysis. Yet this requires some elaboration because, as Gill notes, "the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are contested. To claim that one's approach is a discourse analytical one, therefore, does not necessarily tell anybody much" (2000, p. 173). Within the range of approaches that might be labelled discourse analysis, my approach is sourced in Hall and Michel Foucault rather than Noam Chomsky, or language and communication studies (see Chomsky & Foucault, 2015; Gill, 2000; Hodge & Kress, 1988). Instead of studying texts discreetly or as reflections of some underlying reality, this thesis examines discourse as social practice. This is because, as Hall points out, seeing culture merely as reflection, as structural accounts of language are wont to do, risks eschewing the complexity of historical reality (itself a tenuous term). Hall contrasts Foucault with structuralists like Louis Althusser and Claude Lévi-Strauss. He argues that by suspending "the nearly insoluble problems of determination" Foucault is able to provide complex concrete analysis of particular discursive formations (Hall, 1980, p. 67). As Lois McNay summarises, Foucault rejects "mono-causal explanations" and instead tries to "rediscover the multiplicity of factors and processes which constitute an event in order to disrupt the self-evident quality ascribed to events through the deployment of historical concepts and the description of anthropological traits" (2013, p. 15).

Along similar lines, and while my primary focus is on popular feminist trade books, this thesis traces heteropessimism across a range of texts, including forms of digital media like Twitter/X, podcasts and YouTube channels, academic texts and pamphlets. Though I do at times employ terms such as "reflect" and "reflection," this is not because I believe that the texts or media artefacts I study offer access to any unmediated, stable reality but rather that, as discourse, they construct patterns that reiterate each other. This means that when one part is held up and dissected through close reading, the others' reflections can be seen within, however unstably. Lawrence Grossberg succinctly articulates a practice of "close reading" he associates with Morris's work, and which is what I attempt in this thesis:

To put it simply, Meaghan locates texts in contexts, and makes them into points of articulation in contexts, and therefore she makes texts into contexts, without making the text a microcosm

or fractal image of some larger external context. The key is how the text is inserted into and how it does things with its context. That is, she specifies and constructs a text's or discourse's existence as always located in and inseparable from the complexity of a context, a complexity that it articulates in particular, describable ways, 'inside' and outside its own spaces as it were. (2018, pp. 21-22)

In a letter to John Frow (quoted in a 2018 article he wrote in her honour entitled "Questions of Address: For Meaghan Morris"), Morris claims: "The problem for me reading this is not 'is that true?,' but 'for whom is this written and why does it matter?'" (p. 48). Motivating Morris's questions here is the concern that there is a temptation, if not a tendency, for academic workers to engage rhetorical strategies which position their arguments as "radical" but which omit discussion of how material conditions inform knowledge production and classification and, specifically, how the concrete arrangements of the academy relate to politics "outside." For Morris, this omission limits the address of such arguments to within the academy, which undermines their claim to radicality. As I interpret her, Morris thinks that cultural studies cannot be radical if it is esoteric and disengaged from non-academic discourse. She suggests cultural studies should, instead, engage multiple levels of abstraction, and incorporate its own situation in the service of more detailed and concrete politics. In line with this, this thesis engages with a range of cultural texts, including some that are evidently academic, some that are evidently popular, and others occupying the interstitial zone between the two.

To Morris's first question, I do address this thesis to the academy in the sense that this is a doctoral thesis and my intent is to contribute to scholarly feminist debates on men and masculinity. However, I also want to address feminist women who have felt some version of "I hate men." By "us" and "we," I mean feminist women who have been tempted, in one way

or another, to give up on men. In this respect, I also necessarily address this thesis to men on the left. To Morris's second question: Why does this research matter? Critically evaluating the heteropessimistic notions of inherent antagonism between men and women in feminist representations of the manosphere can create space for alternative gendered narratives. Making sense of the politically limiting ways in which heteropessimism reiterates popular modes of Western misogyny and feminism—past and present—matters, I would argue, because it provides contemporary feminists with an imperative to turn away from a politics of identity towards a politics of affinity.

Chapter Outline:

Chapter one demonstrates the heteropessimism of popular misogyny by detailing how the positioning of men as voiceless victims remains consistent across different manosphere figures and groups. It also explores the ways in which the manosphere has provided feminism with a new set of objects from which to generate ideas about men, masculinity, misogyny and the possible relations men can have with feminism. I begin by outlining some of the feminist debates on men, masculinity and misogyny to which the manosphere has given rise, and then describe the representations that tend to be brought together as the manosphere. Not limited to feminist representations, however, my aim in this chapter is to impress upon the reader the specificity of the manosphere in preparation for my forthcoming critique of the feminist tendency to use the manosphere as a site from which to draw conclusions about "man."

Chapter two historically anchors the feminist tendency to draw conclusions about "man" partly by citing examples from the manosphere. This chapter seeks to provide a frame for understanding the heteropessimism of orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism by looking back at Western radical feminism. To do this, I first draw from Meaghan Morris's *The Pirate's Fiancée* (1988b) to make a case for thinking in terms of radical feminist "positions" rather than "the" (feminist) subject. I then present an extended discussion of various radical feminist positions in Western feminist (con)texts from the late 1960s to the

1980s to make two observations: first, radical feminists took a range of positions towards the "man"; second, these positions tended to presume inherent antagonism between men and women, especially those held by "cultural feminists." Attending to questions about essentialism and universalism throughout, this chapter argues that contemporary resistance to seeing men as potential collaborators in feminist struggles has precedence in radical feminism.

Chapter three examines what I will call orthodox popular feminism through analysis of Kate Manne's *Down Girl* (2017) and *Entitled* (2020), Laurie Penny's *Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* (2021). I begin with an exploration of the term "popular culture" through close engagement with Stuart Hall's work. Following this, I evaluate the latest battles between popular feminism and popular misogyny in Western culture, arguing that they have been characterised, especially since 2018, by spectacular expressions of misogyny enjoying institutional backing at the highest levels, and by the emergence of popular feminisms that incorporate increasingly right-wing ideas and express a prevailing heteropessimism. I propose that one site overseeing this cultural shift is popular feminist trade books, in particular those that extract insights about "man" as general social category by citing examples from the manosphere. It is worth acknowledging that most people do not encounter orthodox (or dissident) feminism primarily or initially through popular feminist trade books but rather through forms of digital media (which I also analyse here, if to a lesser extent). Popular feminist trade books provide an important reference point for this thesis nevertheless, both as systematised representations of arguments made by the feminists I identify with each of these modes of popular feminism, and because this systematicity facilitates my ability to critically evaluate them. Heteropessimistic modes of popular feminism, which I call "orthodox" and "dissident" feminism, differ greatly, yet both presume inherent antagonism between men and women. I will define orthodox popular feminism as follows: it invokes the concept of "patriarchy" to explain why the credibility of women's speech is undermined in Western culture, both on- and offline; it articulates a commitment to intersectional feminism;

it is trans-inclusive; it criticises men's entitlement to, and objectification of, women; it claims that men can technically act to dismantle patriarchy yet expresses despair about the likelihood of them actually doing so; and, it is sceptical about the political effects of extending sympathy to men. Despite articulating gendered antagonisms in fairly standard progressive and intersectional feminist terms, I argue that orthodox feminism evinces a politically limiting despair about men through its use of the manosphere that reinforces the influence of popular misogyny.

Chapter four argues for the usefulness of a category I call dissident feminism. Like the orthodox mode, this popular feminism evinces a politically limiting despair about men but via an alignment with the popular misogyny of the manosphere. To make this case, I begin by justifying my choice to describe Nina Power, Louise Perry and Mary Harrington as both "dissident" and "feminist." I then locate dissident feminism as the feminist "part" of what Alan Finlayson calls "reactionary digital politics," a network whose organising claim is that inequality is "a natural phenomenon, scientifically verified, and the necessary basis of civil order, essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence" (2021, p. 172). The "natural inequality" dissident feminists speak of supposedly exists between men and women, the "reality" of which they argue has been obscured by "liberal" and "progressive" feminists. The rest of the chapter critically evaluates dissident feminism primarily through analysis of Nina Power's *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Louise Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* (2023a). Given dissident feminism's location within circuits of reactionary digital media, however, I will also examine forms of digital media here (e.g. tweets and podcast appearances). I argue that dissident feminism at first glance appears to align with feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Kay, 2024; Laughren, 2024). On closer consideration, however, similarly to Banet-Weiser's paradigmatic case of popular feminism, dissident feminism not only fails to "challenge deep structures of inequities," but also actively supports them (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 13). While orthodox feminism can work to reinforce the influence of popular misogyny, dissident feminism identifies "sex-realism" as the

only solution to the gendered antagonisms it claims are caused by "liberalism." I argue that it thereby more actively shares in the heteropessimism that is so fundamental to the popular misogyny of the manosphere.

My fifth and final chapter considers how we might surpass the political limitations of orthodox and dissident feminist approaches to men. Turning my attention away from despair, in this chapter I speculate about the political potential of hope. I begin with a discussion on how feminists have figured the connection between feminism and feelings. Following this, and aware of the ways in which hope has been and continues to be employed to extend social injustices, I examine the tenuous relationship between hope and politics. I then turn to anger to consider how it is expressed and received differently depending on factors of gender and race. The final section proposes some of the benefits of making hope about men more popular in modes of Western feminism—although not just any kind of hope. The kind of hope regarding men I will advocate for is an embodied and affective orientation towards the past, present and future that is mutually constituted by refusal and sustained by anger. Drawing centrally on Rachel Silverbloom's concept of "hope as refusal," but also enlisting the help of Jacqueline Rose, I argue that *hope as refusal about men* would not only allow feminists to see and relate to men as other than irredeemable sources of gendered antagonism, without descending into misogynist apologia. It would also provide an imperative for feminists of all genders to act, together, for collective liberation.

One final point for the sake of clarity. Although this thesis begins by cohering the manosphere as an object, my primary object of analysis is not, strictly speaking, the manosphere itself but rather feminist discourse on the manosphere. Throughout this thesis, I treat the feminist tendency to invoke the manosphere as evidence that men in general are antagonistic to feminism as an example of how gendered axes of power function and are distributed in "Western" culture. I ask: What does this way of using the manosphere encourage feminists, prospective and current, to see and do? Conversely, also, what does it discourage, or even foreclose? As Rose shows us, evaluating representations does not need to involve a

rigid dualism between “fantasy” and “the real” but can instead concern itself with the iterative relationship between what we claim to “know” and what we can do (2005). In Rose’s formulation, then, I am interested in how the feminist tendency to draw conclusions about “man” by citing examples from the manosphere is informing contemporary gendered politics.

Chapter One:
Representing men (of the manosphere)

I do think a lot of our society has become … kind of like, neutered, or like, emasculated.

— Mark Zuckerberg

Introduction

Accepting that representations are always political—never accurate descriptions but rather cultural productions—complicates this chapter's aim to offer a coherent description of the "manosphere" as an object. It is important for me both to detail the misogyny of the manosphere and to highlight the heteropessimism of its figures and groups, but it is also important not to advance any trickle-down or totalising logic that further naturalises the already entrenched association between men and violence. In chapters three and four, I will argue that, in the two emerging modes of popular feminism that I call orthodox and dissident, talk of the manosphere too easily becomes talk of man as a general social category. Although framed as necessary for the advance of their respective feminisms, this reinforces the influence of heteropessimism and misogyny over the terrain of "Western" popular culture. Asa Seresin's term for embarrassment, disappointment and despair about the current state of heterosexual relations (2019), is useful for thinking about the manosphere. This involves describing the representations that tend to be brought together as the manosphere and, to set the stage for my following argument, discussing some of the feminist debates to which the manosphere has given rise. This chapter seeks to impress upon the reader both the overall heteropessimism but also specific diversity of manosphere figures and groups in preparation for my critique of the feminist tendency to use the manosphere to draw conclusions about "man."

Cohering the manosphere as object

What is the manosphere?

Answers to this question vary, but critical representations of the manosphere—feminist or otherwise—tend to revolve around two ideas: the idea that the manosphere exerts influence over men's politics, especially young men's gendered politics; and the idea that men, especially young men, need positive or healthy male role models to replace the toxic masculine influences found in the manosphere. As Debbie Ging (2019, p. 639) notes, the term "manosphere" first appeared on a 2009 blog to describe a collection of online communities focused on "men's interests" before becoming popularised a few years later when self-published author Ian Ironwood used it in the title of his 2013 book, *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*. Critical representations of the manosphere often scrutinise its most famous figures, like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate, or its various composite groups—such as men's rights activists (MRAs), pick-up artists (PUAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), NoFappers and involuntary celibates (incels)—for supporting male and white supremacy and disseminating misogyny (see Procope Bell, 2023; Ghumkhor and Mir, 2022; Ging, 2019).[4] At what Sarah Banet-Weiser refers to as the "moderate" end of the spectrum, manosphere concerns pertain to fathers' rights in divorce and custody matters, doubts over the gendered nature or prevalence of domestic violence, and the demand for more respect and financial support for the military and its predominantly male personnel (2018, pp. 116-117). At the most extremely misogynist end, men involved with the manosphere explicitly seek to normalise rape and other forms of sexual violence, teach men strategies to manipulate and control women, often in a sexual or financial context, and engage in abusive campaigns against people, mostly women, who express criticism or disagreement with dominant manosphere views. Across the manosphere, misogyny is often entwined with transphobia and racism, in

[4]As I mentioned in the introduction, other famous figures associated (albeit more loosely) with the manosphere include Elon Musk, the richest person in the world and owner of X (formerly known as Twitter); Theo Von, stand-up podcaster and comedian; Tucker Carlson, podcaster and political commentator; Joe Rogan, podcaster and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) commentator; and Dana White, UFC president.

particular anti-Blackness, antisemitism and Islamophobia (see Johanssen & Kay, 2024). And although the manosphere is far from uniformly made up of white men, nihilism, and racial and gendered bio-essentialisms, are constantly recurring themes (see Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025; Johanssen & Kay, 2024).

The manosphere undoubtedly locates frequent articulations of misogyny, transphobia and racism, and it is also undoubtedly cathartic to draw out connections between instances of everyday, casual and subtle forms of sexism and the vile misogyny of so much manosphere "content" (see Bates, 2020). Nevertheless, a narrow focus on gender which slips too easily from manosphere to "man" is evidence of heteropessimism and can reproduce, just with an inverted valuation, the circular logic of the oft-repeated sexist adage "boys will be boys." I want to suggest that a more interestingly productive picture of the manosphere arises from tracing the heteropessimism of popular misogyny, both in the manosphere itself and across feminist representations of manosphere figures and groups. In coining this term, Seresin's primary interest is in people who both despair about heterosexual relations and participate in them, but here I adapt heteropessimism to draw out the connection between the manosphere's pessimism about heterosexuality and its profound misogyny (2019). I theorise heteropessimism as enacted by people who, while seeking to distance themselves from heterosexuality, do so in ways that ironically express the opposite: a profound attachment to heterosexuality. Yet I also see heteropessimism being enacted by people inhabiting a wider range of political positions. In my theorisation, heteropessimism can be seen in the manosphere's vile misogyny, in the way that orthodox feminism uses examples from the manosphere to justify its scepticism about extending sympathy to men, and in the fact that dissident feminist attachment to heterosexuality is founded on understanding men as natural threats to women, which, again, it justifies partly on the basis of citing examples from the manosphere. I think about heteropessimism as a sensibility akin to Rosalind Gill's "post-feminist sensibility" in order to account for more than just the linguistic elements of culture. Understood like this, and despite the fact that not all men involved in the manosphere

participate in heterosexual relationships, manosphere figures and groups can be seen to express profound heteropessimism. Grace Sharkey describes the heteropessimism of incels, suggesting that they "over identify with failure" (2021, p. 45). Drawing from Jack Halberstam, Sharkey argues that the way that incels identify with failure brings with it "a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3 as cited in Sharkey, 2021, p. 45).

This claim about incels applies more broadly to the manosphere. Jacob Johanssen and Jilly Boyce Kay describe "heteronihilism" as "the widespread mood of 'giving up' that is increasingly entwined with, and expressed through, the radicalisation of negative heterosexual experience" (2024, p. 2). This clearly pertains to the manosphere (see also Harrod et al., 2023, pp. 6-15; Johanssen, 2023). Each in their own ways, manosphere figures and groups despair about the current state of Western gendered relations. Ironically, their despair belies an investment in what Jane Ward calls "straight culture," which she argues is characterised by "erotic attachments to an unequal gender binary, or to the heteroerotic fantasy of binary, biologically determined, and naturally hierarchical gender oppositeness" (2022, p. 14). From the available self-representations and community discourse, observers conclude that men involved in the manosphere despair about heterosexuality largely because they are attached to a misogynistic image of women (see Copland, 2022; Johanssen & Kay, 2024). To borrow Lauren Berlant's terms, these men are in a relation of "cruel optimism" to women (in particular), with cruel optimism arising from a situation where "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, p. 1). As Simon Copland puts this, the manosphere ascribes victim status to men by asserting that

> women hold all the keys to intimacy, managing and controlling men's access to their intimate lives. It is through this however that men articulate that it is them, and not women, who become the victims—they are the ones who are the losers of the norms of desire, sex and love. (2022, p. 76)

In this chapter, I take heteropessimism as a keyword useful for elucidating how despair about heterosexuality manifests in popular modes of Western misogyny. I will trace heteropessimism across manosphere arguments about male violence, masculinity and female sexuality, but I will also attend to the specificity of manosphere figures and groups. As we will see, some voices of the manosphere frame women as objects to be pursued and acquired; some frame women as the cause of all suffering in the world and, therefore, to be avoided at all costs; some frame women as unattainable, in relation to which they express both resentment and desire; and some are less concerned with women in general than they are with feminist women to whom they impute conspiratorial powers. The core belief around which the manosphere coalesces is, again, that it is men rather than women who are the real victims of the reigning gender order. As Alice Marwick and Robyn Caplan succinctly put this, the central manosphere premise is that "feminine values dominate society, that this fact is suppressed by feminists and 'political correctness,' and that men must fight back against an overreaching, misandrist culture to protect their very existence" (2018, p. 546). Before mapping representations of manosphere figures and groups—popular, academic and those in between—I want to provide a sense of how feminist debates about the manosphere generate ideas about men, masculinity and misogyny.

Feminism's new bad boys

Given the manosphere's high visibility in Western media circuits, it is unsurprising that feminists have sought to historicise it and situate it conceptually. One issue of debate is whether the "geek masculinity" found in the manosphere is substantively, or merely stylistically, new. Those who consider it to be substantively new emphasise what differentiates online misogyny from other kinds, suggesting that the internet has not simply produced new ways of representing age-old patriarchal tropes, stereotypes and views but rather has engendered its own, new kinds of masculinity (Ging, 2019; Johanssen, 2021; Kelly & Aunspach, 2020; Nagle, 2016). What is "new" about manosphere masculinity, proponents of this view argue, is that it incorporates attributes traditionally associated with adolescence and

femininity (Ging, 2019; Nagle, 2016; Sharkey, 2021). The specifically adolescent tone of this masculinity is linked to the fact that men involved in the manosphere tend to spend large amounts of time on online sites and forums, and are often characterised in one or more of the following ways: playing a lot of video games; living with their parents into their 30s; remaining under- or un- employed; having limited or no romantic experience; and holding what are sometimes described as "juvenile" attitudes towards women (see Nagle, 2016). Much research has demonstrated the fact that once traditional metrics of adulthood no longer adequately capture how people make sense of becoming adults (see Crawford, 2007; Grealy & Driscoll, 2015). Kate Crawford, for example, argues that markers like full-time employment, property ownership, marriage and children are out-of-date fantasies. Yet it is still noteworthy that activities associated with the manosphere are the near antithesis of those associated with more traditional conceptions of masculinity (see also Cross, 2008; Kimmel, 2009).

According to Angela Nagle, incels, arguably the most well-known manosphere group, decidedly do *not* express a traditional conception of masculinity. Indeed, in addition to the traits listed above, they are also characterised by passivity—an attribute often associated with femininity (2016; see also Beauvoir, 2014; Gatens, 1991; Grosz, 1994/2020; Irigaray, 1974; Lloyd, 1984/2002; Wittig, 1992). Nagle identifies an ascendent cultural trend of disavowing physical strength as a virtue, which finds reflection in incel discourse. She writes, "in the information age, the tastes and values of geeks are elevated above the masculine virtues of physical strength and material productivity that preceded them" (Nagle, 2016, p. 76). Manosphere figures such as Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate and those associated with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) are transparently anti-geek, of course, seeking to entrench and extend the association between masculinity and strength (and often physical violence). Also, discourse about "Chads"—an incel shorthand for men who are sexually and financially successful, with strong jawlines—demonstrates the fact that they do value physical strength (see Griffin, 2021). Yet I want to focus on the manosphere's geek masculinity in this discussion because it can be read as counter-hegemonic, while other manosphere masculinities clearly embrace the hegemonic.

Nagle's reference to the "information age" clarifies that she does not think that the internet alone has generated a distinctly new masculinity. She rather stresses the elevated status of the internet as it is enmeshed role in wider social relations. Ging, who agrees with Nagle that practices of online misogyny are different to earlier forms, also sees this enmeshment as expressive of broader trends in contemporary social relations. Ging sees the internet as both a site where social relations are reflected, and a productive site that generates its own social relations, which might reinforce and strengthen dominant norms and conventions in certain ways, but which also transgresses and challenges them in others. Some sites and forums associated with the manosphere (though certainly not most) even demonstrate an increased acceptance of homosexuality or bi-curiosity, which, for Nagle, is evidence for her view that the internet has produced a new masculinity that is different in kind, not merely degree, to those preceding. While the discourse of the manosphere confounds gendered expectations—through the occasional inclusion of pro-gay rhetoric, for example—it concurrently reifies sexual difference and gendered hierarchies, sometimes even mobilising pro-gay rhetoric for this end (Ging, 2019, p. 651). According to Ging, this is why "more attention needs to be paid to the online context, not only because it offers evidence of a widespread and particularly malicious antifeminist men's 'movement' but also because these assemblages demonstrate a radical shifting of the parameters of antifeminism" (2019, p. 639). Though the geek masculinity of some manosphere voices might disavow certain attributes more traditionally conceived as masculine, this has not lessened the extent of its misogyny but rather engendered new practices of misogyny. This gives rise to an interesting paradox: geek masculinity appears to reinforce social norms, such as misogyny, by transgressing their traditional forms. What to make of this paradox?

One element of this paradox is the perception amongst manosphere figures and groups that they are social outsiders. Alan Finlayson's (2021) discussion of how digital media contributes to destabilising long-standing understandings of "left" and "right" provides context for this fact that men involved in the manosphere often reject a description of their

practices as “mainstream” or “establishment” (p. 181). The manosphere belongs to what Finlayson (2021; 2022; 2023) describes as the network of “reactionary digital politics,” a broad coalition of political movements and “ideological entrepreneurs” encompassing the conservative far right, but also certain kinds of neoliberal and libertarian politics. Reactionary digital politics expresses itself particularly and primarily through online forums and platforms, reacts definitively against something, and is committed to a conception of natural inequality. In the case of the manosphere, as Sarah Banet-Weiser has shown, these men are usually reacting against the supposedly hegemonic power of feminism, but also immigrants, especially Muslims, who they consider threats to (white cis-hetero) men’s social status (see Copland, 2023; Johanssen & Kay, 2024). They do this on the basis of an avowed belief in both the “natural inequality” between men and women, and the superiority of “white,” “Western,” “Christian” or “civilised” cultures, which they believe are being “feminised” (Copland, 2023, p. 125). As with other parts of reactionary digital politics, many manosphere figures and groups do not simply want to limit progress but rather question the very principles of liberalism that are taken to define the West (however inaccurately). While extending oppressive social hierarchies, men of the manosphere consider themselves social outsiders.

Alex Meyer’s 2020 film *tfw no gf* captures the fact that men involved in the manosphere think of themselves as transgressive outcasts rather than traditional conservatives (see also Jane, 2018, p. 666). The film also captures the heteropessimism of the manosphere. *tfw no gf* (2020) follows five young, white, American men who spend a lot of time on the internet on sites and forums associated with the manosphere discussing, amongst other things, how no one cares about them. Kantbot, one of the film’s protagonists, claims that “when you’re a man it’s like, you just sort of blend in. A lot of these incels feel like they could just go along forever with their lives and no one will notice them. They just feel completely abandoned” (Meyer, 2020: 0:57:20). While men involved in the manosphere express heteropessimism, they also lay claim to knowledge inaccessible to the general populace. Worth reproducing in full, Kantbot’s explanation suggests that the manosphere makes a contribution to literary theory in the tradition of Friedrich Schlegel:

> You know the main literary form that he [Schlegel] worked in was the aphorism. He worked in the fragment. He founded all modern literary theory and that's what a tweet is. Just because a tweet is small, that doesn't mean that there isn't like a literary potential in there. I'm not saying that every tweet recognises that potential, but if you're going to be doing it you should try to elevate it somehow, just something more interesting, funny, observant, insightful … the idea of belonging to this little community. And you all work together and can create like this historical moment, which can transcend the limitations of your era. And then create a whole new way of thinking about things and create a whole new form of consciousness. (Meyer, 2020, 0:55:34)

Another of the film's protagonists, Viddy, speaks in similarly laudatory terms about the manosphere, asserting that "there had always been that long history of using online to get one over the real world as a joke … where the irony ends and the sincerity begins is almost obscured on purpose as like, part of the joke" (Meyer, 2020, 1:10:04). Some men involved in the manosphere, including Kantbot, go so far as to assert that maintaining a playful distance and ironic disposition is the only aesthetically elevated way of engaging with an inherently fragmented reality, in which claims to essential truths are mere mythos (see Nekrasova & Khachiyan, 2020, 44:34). Many of these men therefore reject the idea that their practices fit logically within, let alone reinforce, prevailing socio-political and economic structures (see Van Valkenburgh, 2021, p. 85).

Feminist scholarship has also debated how to treat this paradox. While some theorists agree that the internet has engendered a new, geek masculinity, significant disagreement focuses on whether this geek masculinity is hegemonic or not, with Nagle even questioning whether it ought to be considered patriarchal at all. Nagle asks, "can a retreat from the traditional authority of the nuclear family into an extended adolescence of video games, porn, and pranks really be described as patriarchal?" (2016, p. 71). Given the explicitly misogynistic

character of much of the content produced by the manosphere, it is tempting to dismiss Nagle out of hand. A logical flaw with her posing of the question can also be identified, i.e., that she does not justify her move from the claim that a new online masculinity disavows certain traditional characteristics of masculinity to the claim that, by virtue of this fact alone, this new masculinity cannot be patriarchal.

My position here is that Nagle's understanding of patriarchal masculinity relies on a misconstrual of R.W. Connell's formulation of the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (2005). Connell explicitly states that hegemonic masculinity is internally contradictory and not to be viewed as a list of characteristics to which men either do or do not adhere. Hegemonic masculinity for Connell is instead about power structures (processes of production) and social practices (consumptive behaviours) that uphold men's dominance over women; it is always expressed and enacted differently depending on the social relations within and amongst actors across local, regional, national, and international contexts. Construed as such, hegemonic masculinity can account for how some masculinities, including the geek masculinity found in certain corners of the manosphere, might fail to adhere to a socially sanctioned "alpha" set of characteristics yet remain patriarchal insofar as they uphold the underlying structures that support men's dominance over women. In *Masculinities*, Connell argues that "hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason and thus represent the interests of the whole society; it is a mistake to identify hegemonic masculinity purely with physical aggression" (2005, p. 164). In the case of the manosphere, neither the fact that geek masculinity does not incorporate physical strength, nor the fact that it actively incorporates passivity, foreclose the possibility that it is hegemonic. Regardless of whether these men dismiss or affirm the value of physical strength, men involved in the manosphere tend to represent themselves as enlightened and lay claim to knowledge inaccessible to the general populace, practices that adhere to, or at the very least uphold, hegemonic masculinity.

I find Ging's nuanced position on the relationship between patriarchy and geek

masculinity more nuanced than Nagle's, and the work of D.Z. Demetriou (2001), and Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe (2014) is similarly helpful in understanding its complexity. Like Nagle, Ging acknowledges that the manosphere does not neatly adhere to characteristics often associated with a certain kind of hegemonic masculinity. Unlike Nagle, Ging does not take this to mean that geek masculinity should not be considered patriarchal. Ging argues that it is entirely possible, indeed likely, that the geek masculinity expressed by the manosphere influences other masculinities, including more obviously normative kinds. This relates to Demetriou's argument of "dialectical pragmatism," in which he considers it inaccurate to conceive of relations between masculinities as unidirectional, whereby hegemonic masculinity influences subordinate kinds but is never influenced in turn. For Demetriou, it is rather the case that hegemonic masculinity borrows elements from subordinate kinds of masculinity when it is strategic for the maintenance of its dominance to do so. As a result, hegemonic masculinity is constantly being reconfigured and is constantly in flux. Demetriou argues that it is better to conceive of hegemonic masculinity as a set of sometimes seemingly incompatible manifestations of power that get emphasised and deemphasised under particular social conditions. Along similar lines, and in a way reminiscent of Jeff Hearn's well-known body of work (1993; 1998; 2015), Bridges and Pascoe draw attention to the political effects of "hybrid masculinities," claiming that they facilitate gendered injustice in ever more innovative ways by distancing embodied men from disembodied masculinity, which absolves actually existing men of their role in perpetuating the current gender order (2014, p. 246). These theorists aid consideration of how, despite initial appearances, geek masculinity reinforces masculine dominance.

The manosphere has clearly provided feminism with a new set of objects from which to generate ideas about men, masculinity and misogyny. Yet I cannot agree with Nagle's claim that the idiosyncratic discursive style of the manosphere forecloses the possibility of it being read as patriarchal or hegemonic. Winnie Chang's work, for example, demonstrates historical continuity between manosphere terms for referring to women like femoid/foid and older patriarchal figurations of women and femininity. As Chang puts it:

> Despite their efforts to present themselves as countercultural, the forum's discourses are in fact enabled by mainstream narratives: the "madwoman" stereotype (Gilbert and Gubar 2000), the frequent appearance of themes surrounding female anatomy in horror films (Creed 1993), the recasting of feminism as tyrannical (Messner 2016), and mass media's sensationalist eroticisation of violence against women (Wolf 2013). (2022, p. 14)

Marking parallels between online misogyny and its older counterparts, Chang provides an important reminder to feminists not to focus on the specificities of the discursive conventions of the manosphere at the expense of feminist critique. Chang's concern is that such emphasis risks inadvertently serving patriarchy in two ways. First, by confounding what is, in her view, merely a contemporary twist on traditional misogyny for a wholly new phenomenon, this distracts and diminishes feminists' ability to respond politically and thus risks normalising the structures of which their discourse is merely a symptom (Chang, 2022, p. 13). Second, by seeking to understand the manosphere, researchers betray their sympathetic stance towards its members. This reinforces the masculinist bias of academia, which assumes that content created by men warrants academic consideration simply by virtue of the fact that it is created by men (2022, p. 13). While appreciating Chang's argument, I do not share her concern that close consideration of the manosphere necessarily distracts feminists. In fact, I consider the opposite to be true. In order to contest the misogyny of the manosphere, I argue, we must treat its discursive conventions as highly specific misogynistic objects rather than merely as reflections of timeless misogynistic norms. For this reason, for the rest of this chapter, I will describe the representations that are brought together as the manosphere in preparation for my forthcoming critique of the feminist tendency to use the manosphere to draw conclusions about "man." My description here is focused on, and resists collapsing, the following (con)texts: men's rights activists (MRAs), pick-up artists (PUAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), NoFappers and, finally, involuntary celibates (incels).

Men's Rights Activists

I will start with a discussion of the Men's Rights Movement (MRM). Sometimes used as an umbrella term for several manosphere groups, including MGTOW and incels, the MRM is used more frequently to refer to a specific section of the manosphere that seeks to extend men's legal rights through political activism. In connection to this latter usage, the MRM expresses heteropessimism by identifying feminism as particularly responsible for men's "victimised" social status. Broadly, "men's rights activists" (MRAs) are men who identify themselves as members of the contemporary MRM, which is often discussed as continuous with the anti-feminist 1970s Men's Rights Movement (1970s MRM) and, to a lesser extent, with the Mythopoetic Men's Movement of the 1980s. MRAs have a pessimistic view of heterosexual relations grounded in misogyny, in which women take advantage of men through the legal system, in particular in matters of child custody, and domestic and sexual violence. In "Australia's manosphere: a prehistory" (2021), Simon Copland considers the differences and similarities between the 1970s MRM and the manosphere, particularly as pertaining to the Australian context. Copland notes that the 1970s MRM originated in the United States with figures like Warren Farrell who, as well as being a former friend and ally of prominent feminist Gloria Steinem, identified men as victims of sexism and sought to liberate men from the rigid "sex roles" they had been assigned. Unlike the pro-feminist Men's Liberation Movement from which they later deviated, however, Farrell and other men involved in the 1970s MRM were not focused on patriarchy but rather on "institutional misandry," which they began to consider man's gravest threat (Copland, 2021, para. 7). These men were not only disinterested in the plight of women but also vehemently opposed feminism, which they thought sought to further entrench, rather than abate, men's suffering. For Copland, the 1970s MRM had a fundamentally anti-feminist orientation, campaigning

> on issues including a perceived bias against men when custody battles go to court, a belief that men are as much victims of domestic violence as are women, and the need

> for a greater focus on suicide rates, education levels and deaths in the workplace among men. (2021, para. 7)

As for the Australian MRM, Copland argues that despite not receiving much attention, men's rights organisations have existed in Australia for decades, and exerted influence over conservative politics. Copland notes, for example, that organisations like Fathers4Equality, the Men's Rights Agency and the Australian Men's Rights Association, all of which have tended to focus their campaigning efforts on the Family Court, are partly responsible for the Howard government amending the Family Law Act in 2006 "to prioritise a child's right to both parents in the case of divorce" (2021, para. 9). Although cases of domestic violence are legally exempt from this amendment, Copland suggests that abusive men have nevertheless managed to use it to continue to see their children and remain in contact with their ex-partners/victims.

While activism is necessarily a defining feature of MRAs, Copland claims that since the 1970s there has been a steady decline in traditional forms of political activism, including on the part of MRAs and men's rights organisations in Australia and the US. Yet this is not, as Copland points out, because masculinist sentiment in the West has declined but rather because it now manifests in ways that make use of our digital era's technological affordances. In place of these older men's rights organisations, Copland suggests, the manosphere has emerged. The manosphere is historically continuous with the 1970s MRM in the sense that both reproduce the notion that there are natural differences between men and women, and that men are naturally superior to women. For Copland, the manosphere is distinct from the 1970s MRM in several ways. First, men involved with the manosphere are more interested in their private lives than they are in public campaigning (2021, para. 20). Second, men involved with the manosphere engage with each other predominantly online and rarely meet face-to-face, whereas the 1970s MRM met "in meeting rooms, in conference halls and, occasionally, on the streets" (Copland, 2021, para. 21). Third, and relatedly, Copland argues that the manosphere's online focus lends itself to extremism because its members are more attached

to preserving the identity of the group by policing each other's behaviour than they are to developing genuine friendships with their fellow group members (2021, para. 3). All of these changes paint a picture of the manosphere as more heteropessimistic than preceding men's rights movements. While the manosphere may be less politically coherent than men's rights movements of the past, the gendered politics that circulate in the manosphere are a more extreme mix of misogyny and despair. As Copland points out, men involved in the manosphere are more individualistic and alienated than their older MRA counterparts. This complicates the narrative that positions the manosphere as a site where socially rejected men escape alienated social conditions, seeking solace instead in digital connection. Copland argues, instead, that men involved in the manosphere "don't find a deep social connection with others. They often remain deeply socially isolated, sitting at home, online, growing angrier about their lives with no one there to support them" (2021, para. 22).

The Mythopoetic Men's Movement provides additional context for the manosphere, in particular for its articulation of the idea that young men need older male role models to become "real men." The Mythopoetic Men's Movement is associated with American poet Robert Bly and his book *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990). This movement mixed ideas from Jungian psychoanalysis with self-help therapies and rituals, all of which were designed to reacquaint men with the "deep masculine"—supposedly innate and spiritual masculine energy—with which "modern man" had lost connection as a result of industrialisation (Messner, 1993, pp. 729-731). Revealing the racism of this movement, Bly claimed that men from "tribal" societies were more in touch with and able to express the deep masculine and, as such, encouraged men from advanced capitalist societies to partake in men-only rituals involving drum circles and fire pits (Messner, 1993, p. 729). Although not opposed to feminism to the same extent as the 1970s MRM, Michael A. Messner claims that Bly advanced false equivalence between the social positions of men and women:

> [Bly's] view that everyone is oppressed by sexism strips the concept of "oppression" of its political meaning and thus obscures the social relations of domination and subordination. "Oppression" is a concept that describes a relationship between social groups; for one group to be oppressed, there must be an oppressor group. The state of play of the contemporary gender order is characterised by men's individual and collective oppression of women. (1993, pp. 729-730)

There are clear connections between these traditions and the heteropessimistic ideas espoused by prominent manosphere figures like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate. Both Peterson and Tate argue, for example, that it is natural for men to dominate women. Both also claim that society obscures this fact, unfairly advantages women and correspondingly disadvantages men in such a way that impedes their ability to be "real men." And both position themselves as role models to younger men, reproducing the idea found in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement that men need male role models. Former avid Quora.com user, and Canadian psychologist, Peterson rose to prominence in 2018 after publishing *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. He published another book in 2021, entitled *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* and yet another in 2024, entitled *We Who Wrestle with God: Perceptions of the Divine*. He also has a podcast (2016–present) and YouTube channel, both named after himself. Dubbed by New York Times journalist Nellie Bowles as "the custodian of the patriarchy," Peterson travels internationally for speaking tours, and offers online courses (2018). Peterson draws from diverse sources like Jungian archetype and evolutionary psychological theories, anthropology, philosophy, mythology, personal anecdotes and, with increasing frequency, Christian theology, to encourage people to clean their bedrooms and, more generally, to take responsibility for their lives. In a manner reminiscent of Bly (as well as Carl Jung), Peterson also argues that a functional society needs to balance order and chaos, which he associates with men and masculinity, and women and femininity, respectively.

Peterson claims that due to the increasing influence of what he and other right-wing

figures call "cultural Marxism," the West is currently out of kilter (see Finlayson, 2021; 2022; Wilson, 2015). "Cultural Marxism" has roots in an antisemitic conspiracy about Frankfurt School figures like Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, according to which, after fleeing to America during the rise of Nazism, these scholars sought to undermine Western capitalism by strategically deploying a mixture of Marxist and Freudian ideas as a form of psychological warfare (Wilson, 2015, para. 4). Today, proponents of reactionary digital politics apply the term freely and loosely to whatever displeases them. In the case of Peterson and other manosphere voices, this includes feminism. For Peterson, there are many social problems caused by both feminism and by women's natural "hypergamy." While hypergamy refers to "an adult relationship partnering with (married or not married) someone who has financial and status attributes that are perceived to be better than his/her own," the manosphere uses the term in a narrowly misogynistic way to describe "women 'marrying up,' to improve their social status" (Buckley, 2016).

One of Peterson's most controversial proposals is "enforced monogamy" (2018b). Again, this is informed by heteropessimism, premised on a despairing image of heterosexual relations, for which the only solution is men's control of women. Although much queer and feminist research has demonstrated the way heterosexual relationships are socially and culturally valued above other relationship forms (see, for example, Berlant & Warner, 1998; Cohen, 2020; Gupta, 2015; Kean, 2015; Rich, 2004), the enforced monogamy Peterson (2018b) advocates makes such privilege explicit. It involves social sanctions and punishments for people who fail to conform to the ideal of heterosexual marriage. Citing studies from anthropology and evolutionary psychology, Peterson claims that enforced monogamy would make men less violent and is thus in the interest of both men and women (2018b, para. 7). His implicit claim here is that men are naturally violent, and that anyone concerned with gendered violence needs to accept this "fact." In chapter four, we will see that this claim is made not only in the manosphere but also in the emerging mode of popular feminism that I call dissident feminism. For now, though, Peterson argues that "anyone serious about decreasing violence against women (or violence in general) might think twice about dismissing the utility of

monogamy (and social support for the monogamous tendency) as a means to attain that end" (2018b, para. 12).

Tate engages in more sensational rhetoric than Peterson. While Peterson seeks to position his arguments as scientific rather than politically motivated, strives to give off a calm, detached and "logical" air, and does not explicitly identify as a misogynist, Tate proudly declares his misogyny. A one-time Big Brother contestant and former professional kickboxer, Tate became well known in late 2022 after gaining a mass following on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, mostly amongst young men. He has subsequently been banned from these and other platforms for spreading hate speech and disinformation (see Sung, 2022). Along with his brother and two other men, Tate is currently facing human trafficking charges in Romania over allegations of "exploiting women by forcing them to create pornographic content" (see Wright & Murphy, 2022). Tate strenuously denies these charges.

In January 2023, The Man Cave (TMC) released a report, entitled "Who is Andrew Tate and why do young men relate to him?", which discusses Tate's Hustlers University. TMC is a charity that offers masculinity programs to help boys develop "healthy" masculinity (see Gardiner, 2024). Hustlers University claims to teach young people, mostly young men, "how to be modern entrepreneurs and make money from cryptocurrency and other technology" (n.d.). TMC suggests that some of Tate's content is genuinely positive, for example in teaching young men that living a healthy and active lifestyle is important, as is learning to strive for financial independence and success. What they do not see as positive, however, is how throughout his online course, Tate combines "great motivational advice" with explicit misogyny, homophobia, sexism and even conspiracy theories (TMC, 2023, p. 3).

Tate has certainly made extremely misogynistic statements about women. At the time of writing, videos have recently surfaced of Tate boasting about beating up and being sexually violent towards women. I will just reproduce one such declaration, but there are a number:

> You know what they didn't teach you in self defence? Here's a little move … when I grab you by the neck and you start annoyin' me, trying to resist, and I just go bam bam bam, and then I grab you by your neck again … then what the fuck are you going to do when your face is collapsed? When your cheekbones're broken? You ain't gonna do shit but cry. (Tate as cited in Joy, 2025)

In 2017, the year that #MeToo exploded into mass media visibility, Tate defended former Hollywood film producer, and now-convicted sex offender, Harvey Weinstein.[5] Tate claimed that Weinstein's victims, all of whom were women, were partially responsible for having been sexually assaulted. He tweeted that "if you put yourself in a position to be raped, you must bear some responsibility" (as cited in HOPE not hate, 2022). Tate also tweeted:

> Harvey. Creep? Obviously. But women have been exchanging sex for opportunity for a very long time. Some did this. Weren't abused. Of course now they will say they were abused. However at the time it was a simple exchange they partook in voluntarily. Not all. But some. (as cited in HOPE not hate, 2022)

Unsurprisingly, Tate's pessimism about heterosexuality is inseparable from his (angry) misogyny. According to Tate, women are manipulative liars, which means that men cannot trust their claims about sexual abuse. Even when women are victims of sexual violence, in his view, it is still their fault. For Tate, as for Peterson, men are naturally violent, an unchangeable feature of reality in response to which women must moderate their behaviour. For TMC, Tate's

[5] Tarana Burke, a Black American woman and activist, started using the hashtag nearly ten years earlier, in 2006. (see Rottenberg, 2019).

misogyny is particularly dangerous because he seems to exert a profound influence over young men. Of the 1,374 young men TMC surveyed, 92% had heard of Andrew Tate and 68% either agreed that he was relatable or were neutral on the question (2023, p. 4). TMC suggests that Tate's influence over young men has led to a situation in Australian classrooms where "educators [are] feeling frustrated, parents confused and young women unsafe" (2023, p. 2). TMC does not advocate merely shutting down discussion of Tate, however, arguing instead that Tate's success proves that men, especially young men, need positive or healthy male role models to replace the toxic masculine influences found in the manosphere (2023, p. 7). Yet exactly what TMC means by positive or healthy masculinity remains ambiguous, as James Gardiner points out:

> For The Man Cave, healthy masculinity is grounded in a linear journey through 'Rites of Passage,' from boyhood to manhood. In this example, manhood is framed as a stable destination that is defined against the plasticity of the young brain, a not uncommon approach to training youth (Grealy and Driscoll 2015). The Man Cave asserts that to ensure the healthy and safe transition into manhood, the journey must be 'contained.' What, exactly, 'contained' means is ambiguous, but we can assume that the transition is foreseeable in advance and requires facilitation and guidance from the programme co-ordinators. (2024, pp. 4-5)

Despite this ambiguity, TMC's discussion of Tate is premised on the idea that men, especially young men, need positive or healthy male role models to replace the toxic masculine influences found in the manosphere. While there is a clear connection between figures like Tate and Peterson, and the Australian and US MRMs both past and present, the heteropessimism of manosphere figures and groups is more extreme.

Pick-up Artists

PUAs are men who try to "pick up" women on the street and in bars by using conversational and flirting techniques taught and learnt in pick-up artist "training" sessions. As Emma Jane puts this, PUAs are "heterosexual men who pursue large numbers of sexual conquests via manipulative, almost ritualistic techniques" (2018, p. 666). Writing for Internet Matters, a website that partners with multinational corporations like Google, Samsung and Facebook (now META) to help parents keep their children safe in an "ever-changing digital landscape," Jessica Aiston describes the gamified techniques PUAs use ostensibly to seduce women (2021). These include paying women backhanded compliments ("negging") and engaging with women's consent as an inconvenience or obstacle to be overcome, playfully or aggressively, depending on the "demands" of the situation (Aiston, 2021, para. 3).

PUA heteropessimism is premised on a misogynistic image of women, and it is also markedly neoliberal. In her ethnographic research on the London "seduction community," for example, Rachel O'Neill argues that men who participate in this community are not "pathetic, pathological or perverse" but rather express the same configurations of intimacy and sexuality as dominate the contemporary UK context, dominated by logics of self-management and enterprise (2015, p. 1). She complicates the narrative that positions PUAs as an aberration, claiming that PUAs are not a departure from, but rather an acceleration of, dominant cultural norms surrounding sex and relationships. O'Neill makes these points not to shield the seduction community from feminist criticism but to consider the "gendered economies of power" that provide its conditions of possibility (2015, p. 2). Patricia Gosálvez similarly emphasises the neoliberal dimension of PUA practices and their views about women. For Gosálvez, PUAs are best described as "neoliberal flirt gurus" who, while misogynistic, also express a version of sexuality entangled with the neoliberal notion that a person's worth is directly related to the amount of capital they can accrue within a competitive market (2020, para. 3). In the case of PUAs, this accrual of capital is the number and "quality" of women a man has sex with, and the competitive market is the dating scene, which is represented within

the manosphere as biassed against men. Expressing their heteropessimism, these men believe that the pursuit of capital accrual is also what motivates women. Like other manosphere groups, PUAs depict women as superficial, materialistic and hypergamous. For these men, the cruelty of women leaves them no other choice but to learn how to successfully play the "game" by becoming PUAs (see Strauss, 2006).

In another article that effectively demonstrates how to pay close attention to the manosphere without overstating its novelty is Valerie Dickel and Giulia Evolvi (2023) examine the discursive conventions of one of the most (in)famous PUA websites, *Return of Kings*. The content of *Return of Kings* is no longer accessible because it was taken down in December 2022 after founder Daryush Valizadeh (aka Roosh V) converted to Christianity in 2018 and decided that he could not have on his conscience "an archive of thousands of articles that [continue] to validate for many men a secular outlook that [inhibits] their worship of Christ" (as cited in Coffin, 2020). Such declarations of faith are a stark departure from much of Valizadeh's previous rhetoric. Valizadeh has argued that the best way to stop rape is to make it legal on private property because, in his view, this would incentivise women to protect their bodies more vigilantly against potential aggressors (see Crockett, 2016). He also claimed that criticism of this argument was unjustified because it was "just" a thought experiment. Although Valizadeh has now repented of such positions, Dickel and Evolvi argue that his website, both its former content and the website itself as a media object, functioned to normalise criticism and verbal abuse against women, dismiss the significance of rape, and affirm men as victimised subjects (2023). By portraying women as men's private property, PUAs like Valizadeh expressed the heteropessimism of popular misogyny and reproduced the idea that men and feminism are necessarily antagonistic.

Men Going Their Own Way

Like PUAs, MGTOW cohere around a fixed and negative view of women, and they are equally pessimistic about heterosexual dynamics. Despite sharing the view that men and feminism are

necessarily antagonistic, however, MGTOW practices sit in stark contrast to those defining PUAs. Analysing the Spanish MGTOW, for example, Patricia Gosálvez writes that, unlike PUAs, their "misogyny has no monetary or social relevance. They do not want to transform anything, but live on the sidelines: they are done with relationships, and their rhetoric is more cynical" (2020, para. 8). Consistent with this, according to their own core website, MGTOW is a group of men who advocate for men to lead a separatist lifestyle void of contact with women, whom they position as the root cause of all men's, and indeed the world's, problems (Jones et al., 2020, pp. 908-909). Although some men who identify as MGTOW do date women, at least by their own creed none are ever to marry a woman, and many avoid forming friendships or having any association with women at all (see Aiston, 2021).

Tanya Basu designates MGTOW as one of the less extreme manosphere groups. Despite this, she identifies a "worrying" trend of men moving away from sites and forums associated with MGTOW and towards those associated with incels: "the most potentially violent" (Basu, 2020, para. 3). Basu claims that, paradoxically, this is due to Reddit's attempts to limit access to the MGTOW subreddit, for example through "quarantining," which requires users to click a pop-up indicating that they understand its content is offensive before they can enter (2020, para. 4). Rather than limiting access, Basu argues, this leads users to seek access to manosphere groups on less regulated websites like Gab, which describes itself as the social network "that champions free speech" (see Webster, 2019). According to Basu, a radicalisation process transpires because Reddit's attempts at censorship are themselves taken as evidence of men's aggrieved social status. This status as marginalised is further heightened because, since being quarantined, MGTOW subreddits can no longer generate advertising revenue. The users who join and remain within the group thus have additional incentives to see their membership as a genuine commitment to fighting against oppression.

Situating MGTOW within the broader manosphere network, Callum Jones, Verity Trott and Scott Wright (2020) critically evaluate the idea that MGTOW is less dangerous than

other manosphere groups. Jones et al. argue that MGTOW has received relatively less criticism than incels and MRAs for two interrelated reasons. First, the fact that MGTOW encourages men to remove themselves as much as possible *from* society is thought to place a hard limit on the social influence, negative or otherwise, of MGTOW. The second reason relates to the fact that manosphere groups are often treated as homogeneous due to their shared allegiance to what is often termed "Red Pill" ideology. Red Pill ideology takes its name from *The Matrix* (1999) in which the heroic protagonist Neo has to choose between taking a red pill and seeing reality or taking a blue pill and remaining deluded. Red Pill ideology contends that, like Neo, men who choose to see the "reality" of the prevailing gynocentric social order have taken a red pill as Neo did. They have chosen to understand that, contrary to popular belief, it is women who are dominant and men who are subordinate in contemporary Western society (2020, p. 909). According to Red Pill ideology, the fact that people believe in the existence of patriarchy demonstrates not that this belief warrants serious consideration, but that feminism exerts a pervasive and dangerous influence on society. The Red Pill ideology is clearly heteropessimistic, a misogynistic conspiracy theory in which feminism is hegemonic, women are master manipulators and men are hapless victims.

While Red Pill ideology exists across the manosphere, MGTOW's way of responding to the supposed reality of feminist hegemony is in one respect more extreme. Banet-Weiser discusses the way that forms of popular misogyny "mirror" modes of popular feminism to the effect of that "of a funhouse mirror, in which politics and bodies are distorted and transfigured so that men—heterosexual, white men—are the ones who appear to be injured by widespread inequities and structural disparities" (2018, p. 45; see also Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025). MGTOW exemplifies this. Mirroring the logic underpinning feminist lesbian separatism of the 1970s (see Robinson, 2022), MGTOW advocates for men to disengage from society. While separatist feminists argued that to free themselves from patriarchy, women needed to live only among other women, MGTOW responds to the "reality" of the gynocentric social order by encouraging men to limit their interactions with women.

MGTOW thus differs from both MRAs, who participate in collective action and protests in attempts to yield social and legal reforms, and incel-identified men who have enacted lone-wolf misogynistic acts of mass murder. MGTOW advocates for men to act individually and disengage from society by turning inwards to pursue projects of self-betterment. Jones et al. suggest that it is this emphasis on self-preservation and personal development that distinguishes MGTOW from other manosphere groups. While MGTOW's heteropessimism is unique, Jones et al. do not accept the narrative that dominates mainstream media coverage of the group—namely, that because it is less collective and less engaged with society, MGTOW represents a sad group of men rather than a dangerous one (2020, p. 1904; see also Copland, 2022). Jones et al. disagree with this, not because the majority of posts on MGTOW forums mention women (although for a group that claims to help men live a life "free" of/from women, this is indeed paradoxical) but because these posts overwhelmingly describe women in misogynistic terms: as "manipulative, liars, sluts" (2020, p. 1904). While MGTOW misogyny might appear less overt than that of MRAs or incels, this should not alleviate concern. For Jones et al., the fact that MGTOW is able to imbue its misogyny with an air of reason risks extending its influence (2020, p. 1917). Copland also found MGTOW to be one of the most racist manosphere groups, reporting that while these men "frequently complain about white women, through my lurking, I noticed a greater willingness to share images of African American women, highlighting potentially that they were more comfortable criticising these women through images and memes" (2021, p. 76). MGTOW reproduces heteropessimistic notions of inherent antagonism between men and women, often by mobilising misogynoir. MGTOW also represents the relationship between men and feminism as necessarily antagonistic, ironically by repeating (with difference) prominent feminist positions of the 1970s.

NoFappers

Like PUAs but unlike MGTOWs, NoFappers connect an idealised version of masculinity to having sex with women. Unlike PUAS, but like MGTOWs, NoFappers think achieving this version of masculinity requires men to abstain from "frivolous" sexual activity. However, while MGTOWs advocate abstaining from all sexual and social interaction with women, NoFappers abstain only from masturbating. Jacob Johanssen claims that NoFappers encourage each other in this because they believe masturbation reduces the amount of sex that men can have with women and thereby their masculinity (2021, p. 166). Refraining from masturbating is nevertheless represented as a difficult task for men, in these communities, because NoFappers consider a specific kind of pornography called "sissy hypno" pornography to have a hypnotic power, in the face of which men are helpless (Johanssen, 2021, pp. 174-175). This is another example of the manosphere mirroring feminist positions, in this case, of well-known feminist critiques of pornography (see Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025; Irigaray, 1985). Radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin (1981) and Catherine MacKinnon (1993) have argued that pornographic content not only represents misogynistic violence but rather is itself an act of misogynistic violence. Although inverting the gendered positions of perpetrator and victim, NoFappers likewise single out pornography as a particular threat. They associate watching pornography with a feminist conspiracy to turn heterosexual men into "unmanly" homosexual men so that women can usurp men as controllers of the world.

While NoFappers thus share similarities with both feminist and other manosphere positions, Scott Burnett notes that numerous posts on NoFap.com reject the notion that NoFap is a misogynistic group. This marks quite a departure from the implicit or explicit identification with misogyny that pervades other manosphere groups. Many NoFappers argue that "because NoFap promotes masturbation abstention as a remedy for addiction to pornography, which degrades women, [NoFappers are] engaged in the fight *against* misogyny" (Burnett, 2022, p. 477). Despite this, and even though NoFappers have also pointed

out that NoFap.com has a rule prohibiting discriminatory and exclusionary language, Burnett suggests that, ironically, when NoFappers are accused *of* misogyny, they sometimes react *with* misogyny (2022, pp. 477-478). For example, when *New Statesman* technology writer Sarah Manavis criticised NoFap's links to the Proud Boys, an exclusively male, far-right and neo-fascist organisation, some NoFappers reacted by labelling her a "typical feminist" who must hate masculinity and testosterone, and want men to be "frail and submissive" (Burnett, 2022, p. 477). NoFappers express heteropessimism by depicting men as helpless in the face of feminist-controlled pornography. In more and less overt ways, they reproduce the idea that men and feminism are necessarily antagonistic.

Involuntary Celibates

Finally, incels are the best-known manosphere group, and thus the one I will spend the most time discussing and conclude with. They are also the most explicitly heteropessimistic of these manosphere groups, their name alone expressing the idea that their celibacy is not chosen but rather inflicted on them. Incels continue to receive a lot of public attention and criticism, partly because in recent years a string of misogynistic mass murders have been enacted under the name of "inceldom." Along with Alek Minassian, who killed ten people when he drove a van through a pedestrian mall in Toronto in 2018, the most commonly referenced of these mass murders was perpetrated by Elliot Rodger in 2014 (Copland, 2021). Both men, though especially Rodger, have since become synonymous with incels. After posting a 107,000-word manifesto online entitled *My Twisted World*, in which he preemptively rationalises his violence as a justified reaction to rejection by women, Rodger murdered six people and injured fourteen others at UC Santa Barbara. He then turned his weapon on himself. Feminists have for good reason thus insisted on unpacking the claims and justifications of incels. Exemplarily, Kate Manne, whose work I will discuss at greater length in chapter three, defines incels as typified by Rodger: "almost exclusively heterosexual men, most of them fairly young, who frequent anonymous or pseudonymous Internet forums devoted to incel ideology" (Manne, 2020, p. 17). Although Rodger's manifesto laments over his not having a girlfriend and never

having sex, Manne (2020) claims that what he desires is not a romantic relationship with a woman but rather the status afforded to men who "have" women (p. 17). Women, Manne argues, are for Rodger not ends in themselves but rather a means to his own ends:

> His rhetoric betrays a desire to have these goods for *instrumental* reasons: as currency to buy status in masculine hierarchies, relative to the "Chads." These are the supposed "alpha males," whose masculine prowess contrasts with the incel's (again, supposedly) lowly status. (p. 17)

As I will consider more closely in chapter three, Manne dismisses the idea that incels might genuinely suffer because of their real or imagined failure to conform to normative conceptions of masculinity. Instead, she thinks Rodger uses misogyny to gain validation from, or even attempt to dominate, other men. On the one hand, for Manne, this demonstrates his willingness to dehumanise women. On the other hand, she insists that Rodger, and incels more generally, are acutely aware of women's humanity. This serves to absolve less explicitly misogynistic men of their role in reproducing patriarchal gendered relations:

> There is also something far too convenient about the idea that incels don't see women as being fully human. It allows *other* men, who don't resort to calling women pigs or dogs, but who may still share aspects of an incel's entitled ideology, to defend themselves too easily… It is not hard, upon reflection, to recognise the obvious fact that a woman is fully human. The real challenge may be in recognising that she is fully a human *being*, and not just a human *giver* of love, sex and moral succour. That she is allowed to be her own person, and to be with other people. (Manne, 2020, p. 27)

Manne's criticism of incels moves smoothly to criticism of "man" as a general social category via the argument that the misogyny and entitlement displayed by "ordinary" men differs from incels only by a matter of degree, not kind. Men in general, she insists, tend to

position women as cold, cruel and uncaring when they refuse to give men what they "deserve." For Manne, it is the pervasive presence of patriarchal norms that emboldens incels to claim that women have the power to abate men's suffering and are evil when they "choose" not to. A wider patriarchal social environment, Manne thinks, facilitates incels positioning themselves as victims:

> [Incels] feel not merely angry but aggrieved; they are not merely disappointed but resentful. They feel not merely let down but positively betrayed, by women in particular and by the world in general. They feel that the world owes them certain favours. And they often believe that they are vulnerable, victimised, and sensitive, even traumatised. (Manne, 2020, p. 27)

The resentment incels feel towards women is entangled with a deep sense of entitlement to their sexual and romantic services, evidence for which is found in the very term "incel." She argues that incels deem it appropriate to frame their celibacy as involuntary instead of what it really is—"merely a disappointing state of affairs" (Manne, 2020, p. 24)—because they believe women *owe* them sex and love; believe they somehow *deserve* it.

For Manne, the racist rhetoric that pervades Rodger's manifesto is inextricably connected to this paradox of incel entitlement. It also demonstrates a strong relationship between incel ideology and white supremacy. Rodger expresses a wounded investment in both racialised and gendered hierarchies. Himself a man of colour, Rodger nevertheless feels a sense of racial superiority over black men, a fact which as well as being egregiously racist also bolsters the resentment he feels towards women. His manifesto complains:

> How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves. I deserve it more. I tried not to believe his foul words, but they

> were already said, and it was hard to erase from my mind. If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl at the age of thirteen while I've had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject ME? The injustice. (Rodger, 2014, as cited in Manne, 2020, p. 23)

Rodger positions women as both solution and cause of his problems because they do not conform their actions to his racialised hierarchy of sexual desire. Timothy Kazuo Steains's nuanced discussion of mixed-race masculinities aids consideration of Rodger's racism. In his analysis of Japanese Australian content producer Jiyayjt's TikToks, Steains (2025) emphasises both "the fetishistic sexualisation of white women by Japanese men," but also that Asian masculinities "have often been described by critics in abjected terms: emasculated, feminised, undesirable, and at the bottom of the racial hierarchy of masculinities" (pp. 7, 15; see also Eng, 2001). The sexual fetishisation of white women and the emasculation of Asian men help us further understand, although of course not excuse, Rodger's heteropessimistic attachment to male supremacy and white supremacy.

Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* (2021), which I will also consider in chapter three, addresses the Rodger event with more intersectional nuance than Manne. Like Manne, Srinivasan treats Rodger as representative of incels. She critically evaluates the widely articulated manosphere demand that women *owe* men sex or, more precisely, that men have a right to sex. Srinivasan is adamant that to entertain the idea of such a right supports an explicitly patriarchal paradigm of desire in which men dominate and women submit:

> Feminist commentators were quick to point out what should have been obvious: that no woman was obligated to have sex with Rodger; that his sense of sexual entitlement was a case-study in patriarchal ideology; that his actions were a predictable if extreme response to the thwarting of that entitlement. (2021, p. 75)

Unlike Manne, who positions incels and feminists as inherent antagonists, Srinivasan considers feminism to be a source, potentially even a privileged one, of incel liberation. She argues that "feminism, far from being Rodger's enemy, may well be the primary force resisting the very system that made him feel—as a short, clumsy, effeminate, interracial boy—inadequate" (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 75). Srinivasan does not advocate for feminism to return to its former role within what she calls the "radical feminist tradition," as a kind of feminist superego that is critical of most women. Yet she also bemoans a deficiency in contemporary feminism. Contemporary feminism is right, Srinivasan thinks, to assert that individuals should have bodily autonomy and be able to determine how and with whom they have sex. Feminism should take great care not to function as yet another disciplinary force over women, nor paternalistically dismiss how women understand and express their desires as mere reflections of patriarchal logic. She thinks that contemporary feminism is better for the fact that it rejects a view of women as trapped in a state of false consciousness. That said, in its insistence upon women's agency and free will, Srinivasan thinks dominant modes of what she calls "contemporary feminism" has rendered itself unable to interrogate the social conditions that shape desire. This is to say, in her estimation, contemporary feminism is unable to critique the influence of the oppressive forces which permeate contemporary life—sexism, racism, classism, ableism and heteronormativity.[6] While I will expand and contextualise this argument of Srinivasan in chapter three, it is relevant here that she sees this tendency in feminist analyses of incels:

> Feminist commentary on Elliot Rodger and the incel phenomenon more broadly has said much about male sexual entitlement, objectification and violence. But so far it has

[6] Although Srinivasan briefly mentions disability as one form of marginalisation, the complexity of the right to sex can be seen with reference to the experiences of people with disabilities. There is a large body of scholarship that considers whether a right to sex does or does not, should or should not, exist for people with disabilities and/or people in the care of the State (see Arstein-Kerslake, 2015; Vehmas, 2019).

> said little about desire: men's desire, women's desire, and the ideological shaping of both. (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 76)

For Srinivasan, it is crucial that feminism simultaneously refuse to blame, control or punish women for their desires but also draw attention to the fact that in a patriarchal social environment, certain kinds of bodies will be less desirable because they confer too little status on those who would sleep with them. In Western culture, she thinks, this will include people with black, fat, trans and disabled bodies but, importantly, will also include many men who identify as incels. Srinivasan offers an ambivalent answer to this question she poses: "Could it also be said that Rodger's unfuckability was a symptom of the internalisation of patriarchal norms of men's sexual attractiveness on the part of women?" (2021, p. 75). As I will expand in chapter three, Srinivasan thus differs from Manne in considering at least some men who identify as incels to have an actually lower status relative to other men.

Similarly interested in what might be legitimate in incel claims, in *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Nina Power even questions the value of the term "patriarchy." Power thinks that men and women proffer generalisations about each other that fail to adequately capture the complexity of what being a man or a woman involves. "Both" sexes feel as though they are not recognised for who they truly are, according to Power, and are resentful as a result. Just as women, especially those who identify as feminists, resent men for their supposed privileges under "patriarchy," so too do men, especially incels and other men involved with the manosphere, feel resentful towards women for, amongst other things, not validating their suffering. While Power claims to take both sides seriously, *What Do Men Want?* is an explicit defence of men. Such a defence is needed, in her view, because the idea that "men are to blame [and that] masculinity is rotten to the core and must be thrown away" pervades current thinking (Power, 2022, p. 72). For Power, men like incels are subject to unwarranted attacks by what she refers to as the "liberal left" and its associated media. To put an end to this attack, and hopefully to the "sex wars," Power argues that we must retain the possibility that

masculinity and men can be–and already very often are–good. Power is one of my examples of dissident feminism and, as I will discuss in chapter four, I share her scepticism about the politics of refusing to extend to men anything resembling sympathy. Yet as I will also discuss, Power herself makes overly general claims about men that reinforce heteropessimism, and again, partly by citing the manosphere.

Jonathan Griffin (2021) also expresses a degree of sympathy for incels in his article "Incels: Inside a dark world of online hate." Having spoken to "several young men who call themselves incel," Griffin characterises them as follows: in their late teenage years or early twenties; having had some experience of rejection from women; and, above all else, as exuding a palpable sense of loneliness. Contributing to the debate about the influence of inceldom on young men, Griffin argues that though it is often loneliness that first leads men to incel sites and forums, this very quickly transforms into anger directed towards women, who are frequently described as "money-grabbing, promiscuous and manipulative" (2021, para. 5). Incels use these kinds of descriptors most often for women they designate as "Stacys," an incel shorthand for women who embody a normative and sexualised femininity. Unlike the supposed majority of women who are unremarkable "Beckys," Stacys represents the particular kind of woman that incels desire. As exemplified by Rodger's manifesto, incels also deeply resent Stacys for being "hyper-promiscuous" yet refusing to have sex with them, which they think denies them their "right" to sex. This reveals again the connections between incel misogyny and incel heteropessimism. Incels believe that they not only have a right to (heterosexual, penetrative) sex *per se* but to sex with Stacys, a particular kind of woman who they deem to have "high value" within the sexual marketplace (see Ging, 2019). Yet they also resent Beckys. Incels claim that due to women's natural hypergamy, even "average" women reject them, opting instead to try their luck at "marrying up" with Chads. As Rebecca Jennings explains, incels

> say that the bottom 80 percent of men are "left to fight for the bottom 20% of females. This works out for about 70% of the males, leaving just 10% of the males to struggle for the bottom 10% of females, who only want access to the top 20% of males." (2018, para. 11)

That is, incels think that Stacys will always prefer to go out with "Chads," again, an incel shorthand for a man with attributes an incel lacks: sexual and financial success, and a strong jawline. Incels see themselves as genetically inferior to Chads and, because of this, believe they have no chance of ever going out with Stacys (or Beckys, for that matter). In their own account, heteropessimism is a reasonable reaction to their lack of wealth, unfortunate physical appearance and, above all, the cruelty of women. For incels, it is therefore not for want of trying, but for reasons outside of their control that they have no romantic success.

Incels do not struggle romantically with women for reasons outside of their control but because they are violent misogynists, Jia Tolentino (2018) argues in "The Rage of the Incels." Similarly to Manne, Tolentino claims that what incels really want is not to have sex with women but rather to preserve and extend male dominance. Given this, for Tolentino, to accept incel pleas about being subject to sexual injustice as even partially legitimate would be to endorse a male supremacist project. Tolentino thinks that incels are not at all interested in fostering a more equitable distribution of sex or sexual desire, since this would require taking seriously the experiences of women, especially those who are deemed unattractive by conventional standards, and trans people—the very demographics that incels spend so much time ridiculing and denigrating. As Tolentino sees it, the only form of sexual redistribution incels want would enforce their "natural right" to have sex with "young, beautiful women" despite themselves being "unattractive, uncouth, and unpleasant misogynists" (2018, para. 5). Tolentino claims that incels regularly post on forums dismissing the possibility that women

can have difficulty in their romantic lives, let alone be incels ("femcels") themselves.[7] One post Tolentino examines, for example, states: "Nothing with a pussy can be incel, ever. Someone will be desperate enough to fuck it. Men are lining up to fuck pigs, hippos, and ogres." Posts like this indicate, for Tolentino, that incels primarily resent not their own lack of romantic success but the increases in sexual autonomy, and cultural and economic power women have experienced since the 1960s sexual revolution (2018, para. 6). Posts like this also indicate, she argues, that incels view and want sex with women as a marker of social power within a patriarchal social environment. Tolentino provides yet another way of seeing the heteropessimism of incel misogyny. Conversely, also, she highlights the misogyny of incel heteropessimism. Incels do not have hope that relations between men and women will improve, so they seek to extend patriarchal power by wallowing (loudly) in victimhood.

Filipa Melo Lopes theorises the incel's attachment to victimhood. She both builds upon, and differentiates herself from, feminist analyses that claim incels objectify women or feel a sense of entitlement to them. While it is true that incels objectify and feel entitled to women, in her view neither of these explanatory models captures the extent of ambivalence incels feel towards women, nor the unique relationship incels have with themselves. Instead of using concepts like objectification or entitlement, Melo Lopes deploys Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualisation of woman as Other to analyse Rodger's manifesto. She argues that incels like Rodger treat women as *sui generis* beings at once human subject and natural object. For incels, women are neither equal subjects nor mere objects. This makes women ideal sites for incels to project praiseworthy images of themselves without having to do anything. Women are not a threat to men, like other men, but their judgements are not meaningless (indeed, non-existent) like those of objects. This also makes women ideal sites onto which incels can project their heteropessimistic dissatisfaction. As well as being useful for explaining the

[7] In their recent article about "femcels" and "femcelcore," Jacob Johannsen and Jilly Boyce Kay note that although incels are "almost exclusively associated with (white, cis-hetero) men … from 2021, a spate of high-profile media commentaries, magazine articles and documentaries began to turn attention to the femcel" (2024, pp. 2, 3).

ambivalence incels feel towards women, Melo Lopes claims, Beauvoir's conceptualisation of woman as Other allows for a nuanced explanation of how incels relate to themselves:

> As Others, women function as unique entities through which men can shore up a vain sense of themselves as pure agency in the world—as what Beauvoir calls "sovereign subjects." Incels' incoherent projection of their hopes and fears onto a feminine Other is what takes them from obsessive eroticization to lethal hatred. (2023, p. 3)

Melo Lopes draws from Beauvoir to offer an ethical prescription for how incels should relate differently to themselves, and resultantly women, differently. She argues that incels need to understand that risk is a necessary precondition to live any conception of the "good life"; indeed, to really live at all. Were incels to accept this fact, Melo Lopes thinks, their relations with women would be radically altered for the better. Incels would no longer use women as sites upon which to project their delusions of grandeur, nor their insecurities, fears and resentments:

> To be anyone at all, they must relinquish their aspirations to be essentially heroes and instead gather the courage to exist in the world: to stick to a class, to take up a job, to talk to people. Otherwise they will remain, like Rodger, mired in envy, jealousy, and emptiness. Crucially, relinquishing sovereignty will also mean the end of their ambivalent fixation on women. If there is no Nature to master, there is no need to incarnate it. If one is engaged in meaningful projects, there is no need for a miracle to accomplish oneself. Without masculine alienation, there is no need for woman as Other. (Melo Lopes, 2023, p. 32)

Sharkey's account of incels similarly does not focus exclusively on misogyny. In "Failure to Thrive: Incels, Boys and Feminism," Sharkey notes that much research on incels is situated in studies of policy, violence and extremism, representing incels in relation to

misogynistic violence, and advocating for governments to adopt a "securitisation" approach towards them (2022, p. 42). By framing the incel as an irredeemable figure, she suggests, feminists implicitly reinforce the assumption that securitisation is the only plausible and reasonable approach to incels. Sharkey argues, in contrast to this, that precisely because the incel is an exemplary "bad object," it has the potential to disrupt much of what feminists treat as self-evident. As an example of this potential, Sharkey uses the incel to complicate feminist thinking about boys:

> I use the incel to think through questions about boys and their relationship to feminism by highlighting this figure's overarching association with a crisis narrative about masculinity defined by heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships. This requires reconsidering how incels conceive of the role of feminism in their (perceived or actual) persecution through the developmental model of masculinity on which their own story of marginalisation depends. (2022, p. 39)

While Sharkey uses the incel to trouble the "masculinity in crisis" narrative, she is right that mass murderers like Rodger have led to calls, from within feminism and elsewhere, for a securitisation approach to incels. Basu, for instance, cites a report from the Texas Department of Public Safety that describes incels as "an emerging domestic terrorism threat [in which] current adherents demonstrate marked acts or threats of violence in furtherance of their social grievance" (Basu, para. 2). Indeed, both the manosphere, in general, and incels, in particular, have been represented as either a stand-alone terrorist threat or at least implicated in a radicalisation process whereby men are exposed at first to relatively mainstream misogynistic ideas, but then ever more extreme sexist, racist, and even fascist ideas (see also Kelly & Aunspach). Even the UK Commission for Countering Extremism, tasked with identifying threats to national security, has expressed concern about how all manosphere groups, and particularly incels, call for the rape and/or murder of women (2024, introduction, para. 4). In Australia, too, the director-general of ASIO Mike Burgess identified incels as amongst the

groups that represent a new type of extremism, one which complicates a neat left-right political divide insofar as they are more "motivated by a fear of societal collapse or a specific social or economic grievance or conspiracy" (as cited in Copland, 2021). These representations contribute to debates about the influence that incels exert over men's politics, especially young men's politics, and most particularly young men's gendered politics.

The heteropessimistic way incels relate to women intersects with ideas present in both PUA and MGTOW groups. The overlap between incels and MGTOW is most obviously that members of both groups self-represent as having very limited, or no, contact with women. Where the two diverge, however, and where incels align more closely with PUAs, is that while MGTOW makes a conscious and deliberate choice not to engage with women, incels at least claim to desire relations with women (Jones et al., 2020, p. 1904). Although the term is often used to refer to heterosexual men who have not had sex for at least six months, who does and does not have a legitimate claim to identify as an incel is contested. What lies beyond dispute, however, is that its current associations differ radically from those originally intended by Alana, the young, queer Canadian woman who first came up with the term in 1997. Alana wanted her website—*Alana's Involuntary Celibate Project*—to provide an emotionally supportive space for people having difficulty in their romantic lives, a far cry from much of the discourse now found on incel sites and forums (see Kelly & Aunspach, 2020, pp. 152-153). While these spaces still include posts about loneliness, as well as other negative aspects of the human experience like disaffection and suicidal ideation, they are often interwoven with extreme misogyny and racism (see Vallegra & Zurbriggen, 2022). The mixture of misogyny and self-loathing in incel rhetoric finds its ultimate expression in an extension of Red Pill ideology known as "Black Pill ideology." Sharing the Red Pill belief in a gynocentric social order, Black Pill's heteropessimism is even more extreme and is often associated with nihilism. According to Patrik Hermansson et al., incels regularly espouse Black Pill ideas, for example that

> a man's life chances are fundamentally determined by his attractiveness, [and that] nothing they can do will change their fate. The only options left are living in misery or taking violent action against themselves and others. [Men are] wronged by the world and [by] women, [who are] responsible for not giving them the affection they are entitled to. (2020, p. 166)

Black Pill is the pinnacle of manosphere heteropessimism—its believers seeing no possibility that their circumstances will improve. These men think that male happiness depends on not being incel, but they also believe that they are unchangeably incel. This leads these men to profound despair, sometimes to such an extent that the only "solution" they can see is suicide. This despair is connected to an equally profound misogynistic view of women. For men who believe in Black Pill Ideology, women's inherent cruelty is responsible for men's insoluble suffering.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on describing the object which the manosphere constitutes with an emphasis on the heteropessimism of its various figures and groups. It has also demonstrated the fact that the manosphere has provided feminism with a new set of objects from which to generate ideas about men, masculinity and misogyny. With a few notable exceptions, whether feminist or not, and whether academic or not, critical representations of the manosphere connect it to a distinctly misogynistic, if not patriarchal, masculinity. While some accounts highlight historical continuity between the manosphere and earlier masculinist projects, others emphasise the role of our digital era's technological affordances. While some emphasise the relationship between sexism and racism, others suggest that men involved in the manosphere are sad, lonely, alienated, angry or some combination of these. This sometimes leads to crediting the manosphere with some legitimate grievances that should be taken seriously rather than dismissed as merely expressive of male entitlement. Critical accounts of the manosphere sometimes consider it to be primarily the result of perverse algorithmic logics,

sometimes of the entangled relationship between patriarchy, neoliberalism and/or white supremacy, sometimes even of a lack of sympathy for men, or a combination of these factors. However, all critical accounts tend to revolve around two ideas: the idea that the manosphere exerts significant influence over men's politics, especially young men's gendered politics; and, the idea that men, especially young men, need positive or healthy male role models to replace the toxic masculine influences found in the manosphere. Feminists thus have a very important place in analysis of the manosphere, including accounting for its emergence, and in efforts to ameliorate its effects. One of the key questions I turn to in the following chapters is how the effects of the manosphere that concern feminists influence their positions on men. Since feminist theorising on men is far from a new phenomenon, the next chapter discusses earlier feminist positions on questions of male violence, sexuality and masculinity.

Chapter Two:

The "man" question in radical feminism

> If hatred exists (and we know it does) let it be of a robust variety. If it is a choice between woman-hating and man-hating, let it be the latter. Let us resolve to respond immediately and directly to injury instead of taking it all out on a more likely victim. It is a difficult stance because it requires a fidelity to what is real in us and neither innocuous nor attractive to oppressors, that part of you which turned you on to feminism in the first place.
>
> —Pamela Kearon, *Man-Hating*

Introduction

This chapter historically anchors my forthcoming critique of contemporary feminist despair by looking back at Western radical feminism, especially of the 1970s.[8] I begin by arguing for the value of thinking in terms of radical feminist "positions" rather than "the" (feminist) subject. To do this, I emphasise the entanglement of context and meaning by drawing from Meaghan Morris's *The Pirate's Fiancée* (1988b). I then present an extended discussion of various radical feminist positions in Western feminist (con)texts from the late 1960s-1980s. I organise my discussion according to five issues of radical feminist debate: male supremacy; sex roles; (hetero)sexuality; pornography; and, the state. I make two observations: first, that radical feminists took a range of positions towards the "man"; second, that these positions tended to centre on notions of inherent antagonism between men and women. This chapter aims to provide a frame for understanding the heteropessimism of orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism by demonstrating the fact that contemporary resistance to seeing men as potential collaborators in feminist struggles finds precedents in radical feminism.

[8] My focus in this chapter is less on periodisation than on the relationship between (feminist) text and (feminist) context, and my analysis is neither a comprehensive survey of all available historical materials nor neat geographically. That is, I am not writing straightforward history here.

I begin with two anecdotes drawn from notable feminist texts of the 1980s. Alice Echols (1983) discusses the first in an essay called "Cultural Feminism: Feminist Capitalism and the Anti-Pornography Movement," depicting a heated exchange that took place at the 1979 *Women Against Pornography* conference held in New York City between high-profile heterosexual radical feminist Susan Brownmiller and an unnamed lesbian separatist feminist. In Echols's retelling, "the lesbian separatist called Susan Brownmiller a 'cocksucker.' Brownmiller retaliated by pointing out that her critic 'even dresses like a man'" (p. 41). What this brief exchange captures for Echols is the fundamental problem with a divergent yet, from the mid-1970s, increasingly popular version of radical feminism. From her vantage point, unlike the real radical feminists of the 1960s, who took care to "identify the male role rather than maleness as the problem," "cultural feminists," as she calls them, consider men "the enemy by virtue of their maleness rather than the power a patriarchal system lends them" (p. 38). According to Echols, whether gay or straight, cultural feminists dangerously conflate the social category of "man" with the biological category of "male," and advance an essentialist and negative, even despairing, vision of men.

The second anecdote comes from Sydney in 1981, two years later, when similar fissures emerged over the "man" question after American radical feminist Mary Daly gave a lecture "to a large assembly of feminists from many different tendencies" (Morris, 1988b, p. 38; see also Curthoys, 1993, p. 33; Genovese, 1996; Monagle, 2019, p. 344). The lecture, which Laleen Jayamanne termed the "Mary Daly event," in which Daly presented both a densely theoretical summary of sections from Daly's text *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and an outline of her yet unpublished *Pure Lust* (1984). This is recalled as "a catalyzing moment for Australian feminisms and feminists" (Monagle, 2019, p. 344). Daly's lecture elicited a range of reactions which, in Ann Curthoys's words, "divided the Sydney women's movement" (1993, p. 33). During the lecture itself, as Morris recalls, one woman even called out—"Mary, you're not speaking to *me*" (1988, p. 39, emphasis in original). In response, Daly made it clear to the woman that she was free to leave or stay, but that a "change of rhetorics" was, literally, out of

the question (Morris, 1988, p. 39). Writing in 1993 and reflecting on her involvement with the feminist collective *Refractory Girl*, in a similar vein to the woman who called out, Curthoys remembers feeling "astonished" that such a "large number of Sydney feminists, including some on the *Refractory Girl* collective … liked and identified with Daly's work" (pp. 33-34). It was because Curthoys reacted to Daly so differently than other members of *Refractory Girl* that she ended her association with that collective. As with Echols on the "cultural feminists," Curthoys considers Daly (and her supporters) too totalising, too narrow, in their vision of men. Unlike Echols, however, who argues on this basis that cultural feminists are *not really* radical feminists, Curthoys is comfortable describing Daly as a radical feminist, going so far as to label her position as "extreme radical feminist" (1993, p. 33). As she puts it:

> Mary Daly's position is what I would describe as extreme radical feminist, seeing men and women as two different orders of being—as I later wrote, "to Daly, no men are oppressed: all women are. Colonialism, imperialism, class exploitation—all cease to exist or matter". (Curthoys, 1993, p. 33)

Context matters, then, when thinking about what it means to be or call someone a "radical feminist." In the New York anecdote, being a radical feminist is for Echols positively coded and juxtaposed against the politically unserious, anti-intellectual and genuinely man-hating cultural feminists—who, it is important to note, also identify as radical feminists. In the anecdote from Sydney, differently again, Curthoys uses radical feminist as a pejorative. This is less out of a concern about man-hating than because, as a scholar of the fraught entanglement between Australian feminisms and struggles for Aboriginal justice, she considers the elevation of sex above other indices of social being to be reductive bordering on racist (Curthoys, 1993, p. 34). Curthoys, unlike Echols, is not invested in the project of salvaging radical feminism from supposed misappropriation; she is not attached to being a radical feminist in the same way. That said, Echols and Curthoys both consider essentialism about men a central and problematic feature of at least some versions of radical feminism.

This illustrates not only that a "popular" vein of Australian feminism has always been in dialogue with other feminisms, especially British and American feminisms, but also that context should not be considered a synonym for nation-state. While Daly refused to engage with the Australian woman who called out to her, reflecting among other things the power dynamic between the two women and their respective countries, Daly's work and visit to Sydney greatly influenced Australian feminisms and feminists. Just as (to simplify) Daly's ideas moved from America to Australia, the analysis I present in this chapter is not bound by geographic borders.

Claiming that the meaning of "radical feminist" differs depending on context might seem to labour an obvious point. Yet insisting on the importance of context means wading, knowingly or not, into a debate about political subjectivity—in this case the difference between "the feminist subject" and "feminist positions." My own contribution to this debate draws centrally on Morris's work, especially her chapter on Daly, "A-Mazing Grace," as well as her titular chapter 'The Pirate's Fiancée," to argue for the value of thinking in terms of feminist positions rather than "the" feminist subject (1988b). Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg (2011) suggest (riffing off Morris) that "even notions of context must be constructed contextually [and] even history must be defined within the specificity of the place from which one speaks" (p. 15). My claim, from the place from which I am speaking, is that by capturing differences and similarities in meanings of "radical feminist" from the late 1960s-1980s, the concept of positions is able to generate a rich field of reference through which to consider the heteropessimism of orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism.

Not "the" subject, but "positions"

I begin this section with a close reading of two chapters from Meaghan Morris's *The Pirate's Fiancée* (1988b). In "A-Mazing Grace," Morris demonstrates the value of "context" by arguing that words—or, more precisely, signs, including "prefixes, and compounds"—are central to

Mary Daly's approach to language, and therefore to her version of radical feminism (1988b, p. 29). Morris's point of contention with Daly is not that she sets up a dichotomy between language and action, and then valorises the latter at the expense of the former. Far from seeing language as of little consequence politically, in fact, Daly assigns signs enormous power; so much so that they actually "work to produce our knowledge or reality" (1988b, pp. 29-30). In Daly's work, the limitations of patriarchal language *are* the limitations of reality. Morris's example is that "the limitations of a language in which 'necrophilia' appears but 'biophilia' does not are, in a real sense, the limitations of a world" (1988b, p. 30). Assigning signs such great power makes Daly's radical feminism a project of fighting the limitations of patriarchal language, which for her is the same thing as fighting patriarchy. For Daly, there is no distinction between language and action; language *is* action.

In response, Morris critiques Daly's approach to language, not through exegesis or by making any straightforward "case" against her, but by highlighting how context functions. The problem with Daly's approach to language, for Morris, is less that she emphasises language *per se* and more that, by narrowly focusing on, and mostly playing around with, the meanings of words as represented in dictionaries, her radical feminism is a limited to a "politics of subverting isolated signs, not one of transforming discourse" (1988b, p. 29). Daly acts as though meanings exist "in" words rather than, as Morris rightly insists, being produced in context. She argues that "reworking 'words' as dictionary items (subverting the code) is not the same thing as paying attention to the ways that words work together in discourse, or *language in use*" (Morris, 1988, p. 30, emphasis in original). Morris acknowledges that context also produces her own "speaking position" (1988b, p. 35). Breaking the scholarly essay's fourth wall, she asserts that her thinking about what kind of article to contribute to *Intervention,* the journal for which she wrote the essay that became this chapter, can neither be separated from her understanding of its conventions (stylistic, political), nor from how she wanted to be positioned in the text in relation to those conventions. By making explicit the

entanglement between text and context here, Morris intends not to "brighten up" her article but "to illustrate what it means NOT to believe that meanings inhere in words: to assume that a context—in particular, at least an image of an audience—plays a part in what is said and how it's said" (1988b, p. 33).

Context likewise produces Daly's speaking position. As Morris outlines, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) is an important text only partly because of its theory. It is also important because it is influential:

> It is important to feminists, because it represents a major attempt to produce a general philosophy of radical feminism: a philosophy which combines a critique of history, a treatise on religion, a theory of language and a guide to how to live. It is influential because it has been read by an enormous number of women, because it elicits positive responses from feminists who might not otherwise agree on anything else, and because it has helped shape at least some of the broad debates in the women's movement for quite some time. (1988b, p. 28)

Recognition that context is part of what Daly's work "means" counters Daly's own approach to language and hence her radical feminism. Writing as though radical feminism is composed of "true meanings" not only licenses Daly to say things, as Morris puts it, "in the same way in the same language in any circumstances to anyone to whom you expect to speak politically," but actually requires it of her, since "to do otherwise would be to speak 'falsely'" (1988b, p. 33). Daly also writes as though subjecting language to (her) radical feminism reveals who other political actors "truly" are and, ultimately, whether they are "For you" or "Against" you (Morris, 1988b, p. 39). By setting up this antagonistic relationship, Daly makes dialogue impossible, especially between men and women ("since a male is a male is a male") (Morris,

1988b, p. 42). This is particularly relevant to my argument here, although Morris is more critical of how Daly's radical feminism relies on "the evil of Other women," including feminist women with different views (Morris, 1988b, p. 29). She highlights a striking parallel between Daly's approach to language and the mode of address she adopts in her lecture. In both cases, Daly refuses "to enter into an exchange with women speaking from positions different from her own" (Morris, 1988b, p. 39). Morris thus "makes sense" of Daly's elitism by contextualising Daly's refusal to contextualise.

I take Morris's approach here as a useful resource for contemporary feminism. Her attention to the entanglement between context and meaning opens the possibility of dialogue between those speaking from different positions–even men and women. This is useful for examining where and why dialogue is and is not occurring between men and women, and for producing feminist positions that can facilitate that dialogue. For my specific purposes, it helps make sense of why heteropessimistic ideas about men endure in Western modes of popular feminism, and for considering how we might move beyond them. The next section therefore scrutinises how antagonism regarding men was central to a range of radical feminist positions in Western feminist (con)texts throughout the late 1960s-80s. Before looking back to look forward, however, I want to turn to a second essay by Morris to emphasise, from another angle, the value of thinking in terms of feminist positions rather than the feminist subject.

In "The Pirate's Fiancée," Morris makes "a few slanted suggestions" about how feminists might use—not apply—Michel Foucault's work, and illustrates the tensions between "a theory of the subject and a project of feminine writing" (1988b, pp. 51, 56). I will not excavate here the various debates within and across Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and (most importantly) feminism that Morris traverses in her chapter. Nor do I want to examine,

however engaging it makes her own writing, how Morris's use of humour affords her an ironic distance from the feminist and feminine modes she discusses. Instead, I want to demonstrate that if meaning is always produced in specific contexts, and always remains inseparable from context then it is difficult to maintain the stability implied and sometimes required by "the subject." Morris argues that theories of the subject tend to treat language as an instrument of theory, premised on the assumption that the value of knowledge is its service to politics. She argues that resistance to theorisation (often as bourgeois and academic) is, however, an avoidance of critical reflection that draws broad politically antagonistic distinctions, both between feminism and a simplistic vision of men (Morris, 1988b, pp. 57-60), and between feminism and other women:

> Constructing a theory of the subject involves trying to work on … disaster-and-devastation zones: one being the outcome of a pugnaciously practical feminism actively hostile to any reflection, confiding itself trustfully to the tender care of sociology, ignoring the claims of economy, and proceeding from the attempt to pit all women against all men at all times to the discovery that the main enemy, when not in The Head, was other women. (Morris, 1998b, p. 59)

However, theorisation can also end up denying context in an attempt to extract itself from ideology—from politics. Feminist theorisation of the subject can treat politics as a project of distinguishing "the science of the subject" from "the ideology of the subject," in other words, as a project of discovering what's "true" defined as eternal and universal (Morris, 1988b, pp. 57-58). Foucault's work offers a counter to this tendency by emphasising the "*implications* of power-knowledge and their historical transformations," because such theories do not have to account for how context and meaning are entangled (Morris, 1988b, p. 62, emphasis in original). Those that assume that "the" "true" feminist subject exists (if only in theory), can

ignore how differences in context affect the meaning of things—including the meaning of "feminist." Feminist theories of subjectivity can be elitist, as Daly's radical feminism shows. They can also be restrictive in other ways, tending to criticise other theories for failing to reveal the science of the subject or, an even stronger claim, for peddling ideology:

> The construction of "the" subject as problem in the discourse and practice of others means that … one [is] forced into the constraints of that form of analysis which consists in demonstrating that women willy-nilly reproduce or reintroduce exactly what they thought they were fighting. (Morris, 1988b, p. 61)

Morris's work thus should be situated with other feminist theories of subjectivity that account for multiplicity. Rosie Braidotti's (1991a) discussion of "The Subject in Feminism" is one example. As is her book, *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991b/2013). Moira Gatens (1991; 1995), Elizabeth Grosz (1987; 1994/2020) and Genevieve Lloyd (1984/2002) are others—a collection of writers and work Claire Colebrook (2000) has claimed represent a distinctly "Australian" feminism.[9] She makes this claim in the course of comparing two attempts at theorising subjectivity that move beyond questioning women's essential sameness or difference to men. The first is Judith Butler's "linguistic approach," in which the body is figured as an effect of representation, and the second attempt she aligns with the work of these three Australian feminist philosophers. On the latter, she says:

> The second possibility for thinking the body beyond sameness and difference recognizes that no simple appeal can be made to the body as some ultimate foundation; nevertheless, while the body may only be referred to through discourse or

[9] Braidotti was also partly educated in Australia from the age of 16 until the time she moved to France to complete her doctorate.

> representation, it possesses a force and being that marks the very character of representation. (Colebrook, 2000, p. 77)

Despite the nuance of these theories, and their promise for diversifying claims about women or feminists that could be starkly opposed to men, any claims regarding "the" feminist subject, including these, can be difficult to reconcile with the claim that differences in context affect meaning. To put it bluntly, if any version of "the" feminist subject exists, then changes in context do not *need* to affect its "true" meanings. As Morris points out, "few proponents of a theory of the subject" would reject the claim that "there is a relation between analytic knowledge and practice, and socio-political power relations" (1988b, p. 60). What they do sometimes disavow, however, is the contextually specific investigation that accepting this claim actually necessitates. The more rigid the feminist theory of the subject, the more limited its relevance to contemporary feminist politics because, as Morris puts it, such

> analysis is largely deprived of any operative means of distinguishing between strategies of power and tactics of resistance, between statements in common (Right to Life, Right to Choose, for example) on the one hand, and antagonistic discourses on the other. (1988b, p. 61)

On the basis of this discussion, which is aligned with post-structuralist feminism in general but is more specifically indebted to Morris's recontextualisation of Foucault, this thesis approaches feminist texts as produced by and from feminist positions rather than any particular political subjectivity. While the concept of "the subject" does not require that attention be paid to how context affects meaning, the concept of "positions" does involve this requirement. This makes it helpful for noticing differences between meanings of "radical

feminist," as well as the persistence of certain assumptions, including the one I focus on here—the notion that men's role in feminism is that of antagonist. My categories of orthodox and dissident in the following chapters are categorisations of positions, not of subjectivities, and my discussion of radical feminism that follows here similarly treats "radical feminist" as a position, or a set of positions always subject to context, and as a set of texts continually resubjected to context as they recirculate within and as feminism.

Radical feminist positions towards "the man"

This section offers an extended discussion of radical feminist positions on "man" from which I wish to make and support two observations: first, radical feminists took a range of positions towards the "man"; second, these positions tended to centre on notions of inherent antagonism between men and women. Contemporary Western popular culture commonly remembers "radical feminism" as a prominent branch of the "second wave" of feminism, associated with the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and 70s.[10] This radical feminism is "popular" in two simple senses: it neither emerged exclusively from, nor has ever been confined to, the academy; and, to borrow a phrase from Ellen Willis, it "turned women on by the thousands" (1984, p. 92). Popular though it may be, radical feminism is also ridiculed, denounced and dismissed and, as Breanne Fahs argues, "remains one of the most tense, maligned and misunderstood segments of the feminist movement" (2024, p. 479).

Popular and academic discourses tend to represent radical feminism as offering a more fundamental and strident critique of patriarchy than "liberal feminism" (see Echols & Willis, 2019; Fahs, 2018; Mackay, 2022). According to this simple narrative, unlike the liberal feminists who were willing to work with the state, radical feminists considered it insufficient to try and reform patriarchal institutions,

[10] In chapter three, I will present a discussion of the term "popular culture" through close engagement with Stuart Hall's work.

wanting rather to recalibrate society entirely by attacking its supposedly patriarchal roots. Throughout this period, feminists of many persuasions sought to make explicit the connections between the private and public spheres through scrutiny of "sexuality, the body, spirituality, housework, emotions [and] the family" (Fahs, 2024, pp. 480-481). What apparently set radical feminists apart from their liberal, socialist and Marxist counterparts, though, was the view that "male supremacy" is a system in which men are a ruling class that subordinates an oppressed class of women, depicting patriarchy as the oldest and most primary form of domination, from which all "other kinds of hierarchy" stem (Willis, 1984, pp. 93-96; see also Lewis & Seresin, 2022, p. 467).

Such radical feminism has been criticised for the ontological misandry frequently taken to define it, as well as for its failure to account for important differences among women, especially regarding matters of race, class and gender (see Ang, 2020; Zinn, 1982; Beal, 1969; Brown, 1995/2020; hooks, 1981, 2000; Pettman, 1992). Though the 1990s is often described as "post-feminist," it is also a period in which "third-wave feminists," as they called themselves in the US at the time, criticised how women of colour were positioned, partly as a result of radical feminism, as having a supposedly "split" loyalty—to "womankind," on the one hand, and to their racial or ethnic community, on the other (see Gill, 2007, 2008; Heywood & Drake, 1997; McRobbie, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Walker, 1992). Less remarked upon in public discourses are the many differences in radical feminist responses to the "man" question. In my ensuing analysis, I will demonstrate not only that radical feminist positions throughout the late 1960s-80s tended to involve antagonism towards men, but also that the precise nature of this antagonism varied greatly depending on context. I organise my discussion according to five issues of radical feminist debate: male supremacy; sex roles; (hetero)sexuality; pornography; and, the state.

Debating male supremacy

Just as there is not one true radical feminist subject, there is not one true radical feminist position in debates on male supremacy. Throughout the late 1960s-80s, radical feminists held different views on the relationship between men and patriarchy, and on how women should therefore relate to men in the ever entangled personal and political spheres. In New York from the late 1960s into the 1970s, for example, as Echols's criticism of cultural feminism shows, radical feminists debated whether it was possible to distinguish between a "male role" produced in and by patriarchal conditions and maleness *per se* and, if so, whether the former or latter was more fundamental an "enemy" of feminism (1983, p. 38). This debate about whether men's presumed predilection for dominating women is socially constructed or innate connects to a disagreement over the existence of male and female "principles" or "values," with Echols's camp criticising those whom they labelled cultural feminists—such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and *The Feminists*, but also Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich and Kathleen Barry—for assuming the "intractability of maleness and femaleness" (see also Alcoff, 1988, p. 408; Willis, 1984, p. 91). The feminist organisation *Redstockings*, in particular, argued that cultural feminists misrepresented radical feminism, reducing it to a project of exposing how society privileged the male principle and denigrated the female. According to this critique, cultural feminists held an essentialist view of gender difference that not only diverged from, but was also antithetical to, the radical feminism of the 1960s (see Echols, 1983, p. 35; Willis, 1984, p. 91).

Willis recalls this debate among and between radical and other feminist positions in her article "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism" (1984). Far from a disinterested spectator, Willis was a founder of *Redstockings* alongside Shulamith "Shulie" Firestone in January 1969 and so, to her, its differences from the radical feminism espoused by, for

example, Ti-Grace Atkinson and *The Feminists*, are obvious and important. Within the left in New York at the time, however, distinctions between competing radical feminist tendencies were rarely made outside the feminist circles directly engaged in these debates (Willis, 1984, p. 91). In Willis's own description, *Redstockings'* radical feminism was grounded in two central elements. The first was that it viewed "sexual class struggle as the direct exercise of power by men, acting in their economic, social and sexual self-interest, over women" (Willis, 1984, p. 97). *Redstockings* argued against feminists who saw patriarchal logic or structures as existing somewhat independently of men, and who resultantly did not view patriarchy as the amalgam of men's conscious actions (Willis, 1984, p. 97). Willis outlines the *Redstockings* rebuttal to this view as follows:

> The idea that systems (like the family or capitalism) are in some sense autonomous, that they operate according to a logic that in certain ways constrains the rulers as well as the ruled, was rejected as a mystification and a way of letting men off the hook. To say, for instance, that the family oppressed women was to evade the fact that our husbands and fathers oppressed us; to say that men's sexist behavior was in any way dictated by social or familial norms was to deny that men oppressed women by choice, out of self-interest. (1984, p. 97)

Examining the context in which *Redstockings* made this argument suggests that a split within its precursor *New York Radical Women* contributed to this element of its radical feminism. In 1968, only a year after being founded, "deep division" within *New York Radical Women* resulted in what is now known, albeit still in very limited circles, as the "politico-feminist split" (1984, p. 93). The so-called "politicos" argued that capitalism was the fundamental cause of women's oppression. Loyal to the New Left, they interpreted sex roles mainly as a component of capitalist ideology that aimed "to promote consumerism and/or

keep women as a cheap reserve labor force and/or divide the workers" (Willis, 1984, p. 93). The "feminists," who soon began to call themselves "radical feminists," had a different view. Many from this camp had started their political lives in the civil rights movement and, taking inspiration from the black power struggle, considered male supremacy to be a standalone system of oppression, the only solution to which was a revolution of all women against all men. For the radical feminists, Willis among them, men of the left were part of the ruling class by virtue of their being men, and would therefore only be dragged kicking and screaming into supporting the dismantling of patriarchy. In contrast with the politicos, who thought that feminists should work with leftist men, the radical feminists argued that to avoid being subsumed by the male-dominated left, radical feminism had to be "autonomous, create its own theory and set its own priorities" (Willis, 1984, p. 93). Here, as elsewhere, context enables a fuller account. *Redstockings'* radical feminism was produced in part through differences with socialist and Marxist feminist positions (Willis, 1984, p. 117). Such contextualisation also demonstrates that antagonism towards men was a central feature of what *Redstockings* meant by "radical feminism." While radical feminists tended to agree on the primacy of male supremacy, there was significant disagreement among radical feminists over questions about whether "woman" and "man" constitute sex roles, sex classes, both, or neither.

Debating sex roles

Context also enables greater understanding of the positions taken by radical feminists in debates on sex roles and sex classes. Context is important, for example, for distinguishing the *Redstockings'* "pro-woman line" from two other radical feminist organisations active in New York at the time—*The Feminists* and *New York Radical Feminists* (Willis, 1984, p. 97). In Willis's description, *Redstockings* held an "absolutely anti-psychological" position, criticising any attempt to explain men's behaviour psychologically as letting them off the hook just as much as an over-structural conception of patriarchy (1984, p. 97). While *Redstockings* likewise rejected psychological explanations of women's behaviour, especially sexist ones

premised on the notion that there exists an innate "feminine" psychology, submissiveness or passivity, there is something markedly, if implicitly, psychological about the assertion that it is "rational" for women living under patriarchal conditions to conform to feminine norms. Whatever its level of theoretical consistency, *The Feminists* did not share this position, despite also identifying as radical feminists, and agreeing "with *Redstockings* that male domination was the primary oppression and that women and men were political classes" (Willis, 1984, p. 102).

For Willis, this difference stems from the fact that Ti-Grace Atkinson and other influential members of *The Feminists* "used the terms 'sex role' and 'sex class' interchangeably" (p. 102). According to Willis, Atkinson and co failed to distinguish between the sex *role* that patriarchy imposes *on* women and the sex *class* to which all women belong, which serves as the fundamental basis for their political agency (1984, p. 102). In her account, *The Feminists* tended to criticise women more often and more strongly than *Redstockings* because they believed that "the female role, *per se*, defined women's oppression" and that a woman "conforming to the role was [therefore] upholding the oppression" (1984, p. 102). Despite remembering this period differently to Willis, as recently as 2014 Atkinson advanced this conception of sex class while at a conference on 1960s-70s radical feminism. During a conference paper at Boston University entitled, *The Descent from Radical Feminism to Postmodernism,* Atkinson claimed that though radical feminists held divergent positions on a range of issues, "the one assumption no one questioned was that women formed a class and that this class was an artificial one and designed for political purposes to oppress women" (2014, p. 2). This departs from Willis's version of events, especially her claim that this conception of sex class set *The Feminists* apart from other radical feminist groups by making it impossible for its members to accurately determine when to criticise women and when to offer them sympathy, support and solidarity (1984, p. 102).

Redstockings and *The Feminists* were not the only radical feminist groups active in New York in the late 1960s. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt formed another group called *New York Radical Feminists* towards the end of 1969 (Willis, 1984, p. 104).[11] *New York Radical Feminists'* initial contribution to this debate about why women conform to patriarchal norms was to reject both the pro-woman line of *Redstockings* and the more critical position of *The Feminists*. What Willis frames as the standard radical feminist account of men's power dovetails with the sociological concept R.W. Connell (2000, pp. 24-26) later called the "patriarchal dividend," which explains men's desire to dominate women as being related to the material benefits they gain by doing so. In contrast to this, *New York Radical Feminists* argued that men did not subordinate women to gain material benefits but inversely valued material benefits insofar as these were manifestations of their power over women (Willis, 1984, pp. 104-105). Connell (2000), and the sociologists with whom she worked such as Tim Carrigan and John Lee (see Carrigan et al., 1985/2018), outright rejected the notion of a "male sex role," arguing that its psychological groundings lead to a tautological account of gender. *New York Radical Feminists* explained not only men's behaviour but also women's behaviour psychologically. In Willis's account, Firestone and Koedt "insisted that feminine behavior was both enforced and internalized," claiming that "women were trained from birth both to conform to the feminine role and to accept it as right and natural" (1984, p. 105). Willis gives *New York Radical Feminists* credit for the attempt at analysis, but ultimately rejects the group's position as "incoherent, implicitly biologistic, and sexist" (1984, p. 105). For her and her *Redstockings* sisters, the notion that women are not only oppressed by men consciously but also by both men and women unconsciously was tantamount to suggesting that women are inherently passive, men inherently active, and resistance against patriarchy, for these reasons, inherently futile. Where *Redstockings* argued that men consciously adopted the role

[11] Other American radical feminist groups include *CLIT, Radicalesbians, Women Against Pornography, Boston Female Liberation, Cell 16* and *Coalition Against Trafficking Women.* There are also many more feminists who are arguably "radical" than I have the space to discuss in this chapter. See also *Radical Feminism* (eds. Koedt et al., 1973).

of feminist antagonist and *The Feminists* emphasised women's complicity in upholding men's dominance over women, *New York Radical Feminists* viewed both men and women as largely unconscious agents of patriarchy.

Debating (hetero)sexuality

Radical feminist debates on sex roles often dovetailed into debates on how to live a radical feminist "lifestyle." While looking back on her involvement in radical feminist circles in New York, for example, Willis laments what she sees as its decline from the truly *radical* feminism of the late 1960s. Despite its problems, Willis sees the earlier feminism as having posed a fundamental challenge to the sexist status quo, while the later feminists claimed to be radical but offered women little more than a lifestyle, and certainly far less than liberation. Arguably, having an available or even desirably feminist way of living was in itself pretty "radical" in the 1970s. For Willis, however, "lifestyle" is a way for her to express disappointment about what she sees as the lack of interest on the part of these "new" radical feminists' to engage in traditional forms of political activism such as: attending meetings and pickets; organising protests and sit-ins; and, handing out leaflets. In her view, cultural feminists espoused the idea that "left politics were 'male' and could therefore be safely ignored," which in conjunction with the "gay-straight split" of the early 1970s, led many radical feminists in New York to withdraw from involvement in political struggle (1984, p. 107).[12]

Debates over the meaning of living a radical feminist lifestyle raised questions about whether it was legitimate to call yourself a radical feminist if you had sex with men. According to Willis, some cultural feminists insisted that straight women had a strategic advantage over lesbian women because heterosexuality facilitated a closeness with men that was useful for

[12] Feminism is no stranger to inter and intra generational disagreements (see Summers, 1993).

cultivating solidarity between the sexes (1984, p. 104). Others argued that to truly be radical feminists, women had to live their lives separate from the enemy—meaning men (Willis, 1984, p. 104). As she represents it, the appeal of cultural feminism derived from its separatist ideology, which came in some form of the argument that the female principle was superior to the male. However, the form of separatism that straight cultural feminists could offer women was limited to the rather abstract "moral reward of revolutionary purity" (Willis, 1984, p. 111). Lesbian cultural feminists, by contrast, in addition to this moral reward, could offer women "concrete social and sexual benefits," which Willis claims soon began to be framed "not simply as a strategy for achieving women's liberation or as a form of sustenance for its troops but as the meaning and purpose of feminism" (1984, p. 111). Regardless of whether these—by her account, "new"—radical feminists advocated the benefits of being gay or straight, Willis insists that they affirmed "the polarization of the sexes" (1988, p. 112). By the mid-1970s, she argues, radical feminism was no longer a politics of hope; it had become a politics of despair:

> The gap between what radical feminism promised and what it could deliver without a more complex, multivalent theory and strategy was … all too soon filled by attempts at individual liberation through "overcoming female conditioning," fantasies of benevolent matriarchies, the equation of woman-bonding, an alternative women's community and/or a "politically correct lifestyle" with feminism, and moralizing about the iniquity of men and "male values." Underlying these individualist and countercultural revisions of radical feminism was an unadmitted despair of real change. (Willis, 1984, p. 105)

Willis's belief that questions about "lifestyle" were politically unserious is at odds with "the personal is political" maxim taken up by feminists of a range of different persuasions around this time, so it is unsurprising that radical feminists reflected deeply on whether and

how women should relate to men, including in the most physically intimate settings. Anne Koedt (1968/1970) contributed to this debate with her widely-read essay "The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm." Distinguishing between heterosexual sex as an *act* and heterosexual sex as an *institution*, she argues that while the act of heterosexual sex (as in, sex involving the penetration of a penis into a vagina) may well be just one sex act among many others, the institution of heterosexual sex is an altogether different beast, systematically promoting and prioritising male pleasure at the expense of the female (1968/1970, p. 38). Responding to the centuries-old idea that women do not experience sexual pleasure because of some innate either physiological or psychic frigidity, Koedt claims instead that to even understand women's sexual struggle—let alone begin to remedy it — society needs first to reckon with what Jane Gerhard later summarised as "the larger social dysfunction of sexism, enforced heterosexuality and homophobia" (2000, p. 466). In Koedt's view, it is the patriarchal myth that heterosexual sex is natural and therefore morally superior to all other forms that serves to position women as responsible for their own sexual dissatisfaction, which is implicitly framed as inevitable. To challenge this, she advocates a shift away from the vagina towards clitoral stimulation. More generally, she argues that to increase women's agency, within and beyond the sexual realm, society needs to completely revise its sexual vocabulary:

> What we must do is redefine our sexuality. We must discard the "normal" concepts of sex and create new guidelines which take into account mutual sexual enjoyment … We must begin to demand that if certain sexual positions now defined as "standard" are not mutually conducive to orgasm, they no longer be defined as standard. New techniques must be used or devised which transform this particular aspect of our current sexual exploitation. (Koedt, 1968/1970, p. 38)

Atkinson (1968/1970) articulates an even stronger position against heterosexuality in "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse." She has since described this essay—again, at the 2014 Boston University conference—as an "attempt to challenge the necessity of heterosexuality and, by implication, those institutions which are based upon this assumption" (p. 2). Extending Koedt's claim that patriarchy makes it impossible for women to experience sexual pleasure, she argues that patriarchy—and, specifically, its attempt to confine women to the reproductive role—is also to blame for the fact that society privileges heterosexuality over all other kinds (1968/1970, p. 44). According to Atkinson, even the notion that humans have a sexual drive or instinct, at least to the extent that it leads people to engage in heterosexual sex, is little more than patriarchal conditioning. For her, it is difficult to imagine how heterosexual sex, not only in its institutional form, but also the act itself, could ever be compatible with women's liberation:

> Since our society has never known a time when sex in all its aspects was not exploitative and relations based on sex, e.g., the male-female relationship, were not extremely hostile, it is difficult to understand how sexual intercourse can even be salvaged as a practice, assuming that our society would desire positive relationships between individuals. (Atkinson, 1968/1970, pp. 44-45)

In the 1970s, to claim that it was impossible to reconcile heterosexuality and feminism was a fairly common refrain in radical feminist circles. Rita Mae Brown, for example, argued that "to give a man support and love before giving it to a sister is to support that culture, that power system" (as cited in Segal, 2015, p. 70). Brown was part of New York *Radicalesbians*, a network of lesbian radical feminists who called themselves "women-identified women" (see Segal, 2015, pp. 70-71). *Radiclesbians* believed, as Charlotte Bunch put this in 1972, that lesbianism

was “the key to liberation and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance” (as cited in Segal, 2015, p. 71).

Other feminists strongly rejected this notion that heterosexuality is incompatible with women’s liberation, let alone the idea that it is a fundamental cause of women’s oppression. Lynne Segal argues in *Straight Sex* (originally published in 1994) that “the suggestion that men are motivated solely by sadistic aggression is only a new way of affirming what it pretends to deplore” (2015, p. 14). Born in Sydney but active in feminist and New Left circles in London from the 1960s, Segal’s book suggests that feminists need to be more careful not to frame male sexuality as naturally violent. She laments what she sees as the increasing take up by feminists, post-1960s sexual revolution, of a negative and essentialising approach to heterosexuality. Segal connects this to the whiteness of the US and UK women’s liberation movements:

> Not surprisingly, the tendency simply to blame men, which was soon to overtake the passion to reform them, has always been present in feminist thinking and culture — at least, within the white feminist perspectives which have dominated women’s liberation movements in both Britain and the USA. But it gained ground with various theoretical and strategic shifts in feminist understanding of sexuality, personal life and women’s oppression in the 1970s. (2015, p. 69)

For Segal, it is not the case that black feminists like Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, or organisations like the Combahee River Collective “were uncritical of men” but rather that “they were not prepared to give up on men” (2015, pp. 80, 81). Writing in the Australian context, Kunjandi lawyer and activist Pat O’Shane argues forcefully that her position towards men

depends on which men are being considered. In her 1993 essay "Aboriginal Women and the Women's Movement," O'Shane takes different positions towards black men and white men:

> I believe it is true to say that in a male dominated white society black men pose a greater threat to that dominance than do women, and it is for that reason that black men have been so enslaved, caught in the "pub-to-gaol" phenomenon. That Aboriginal women pose no threat to white men is very clearly seen by the fact that they have so often been, and continue to be, considered as easy game for the racist rape. (p. 72)

Like white feminists, Black feminists across the West held a range of positions towards men throughout the late 1960-1980s. Some Black feminists *did* give up on men, including black men. Segal summarises this:

> Rhonda Cobham declared: "Black women do not spend their lives putting down men." In fact, black feminists, like white feminists, did not speak with one voice: Michele Wallace wrote of the "profound distrust, if not hatred" between black men and women in the USA, in a way which held out little hope for change, while Linda Bellos was one of the most active and militant revolutionary feminists in London. (2015, p. 81)

For her part, Segal claims that feminists should strive to reorganise heterosexual love and desire in a way that supports the realisation of a feminist social order. "Instead of guilt-tripping heterosexual women," she argues, "feminists would do better to enlist them in the 'queering' of traditional understandings of gender and sexuality" (Segal, 2015, p. 13). In practice, according to Segal, what this looks like is questioning

> all the ways in which women's bodies have been coded as uniquely "passive", "receptive" or "vulnerable". But we must also look at male heterosexual desire. The two are inextricably intertwined. "Active" female sexuality is closely tied to the possibility of recognizing the disavowed "passivity" of male sexuality. (2015, pp. 13-14)

Other feminists in Australia, like O'Shane, debated questions about the relationship of sexuality to radical feminism, the meaning of a radical feminist lifestyle, and associated questions regarding how to relate to men. In her writing on lesbian feminism in Australia, for example, Sophie Robinson complicates the standard periodisation of Western women's liberation movements, which, advanced by the likes of Echols and Willis, marks its end "as an identifiable movement from the beginning of 1975, with feminist activism becoming more dispersed and diffuse in the 1980s" (2022, p. 109). At least when thinking about Australia, she argues, the claim that the oft-conflated cultural feminists and lesbian separatists are not only politically unserious, but also appropriate signifiers for "bigotry and disunity" sits in tension with the historical facts (Robinson, 2022, p. 109). For there was a significant crossover between the women who adopted a lesbian separatist lifestyle—living in women only share-houses in inner-city Sydney suburbs like Leichhardt or Glebe, for example—and the women who were responsible for setting up rape crisis centres and women's refuges (Robinson, 2022, p. 109). Robinson departs from Echols's view, which is that "with the rise of lesbian feminism, the confusion between the personal and the political was complete and unassailable" (Echols as cited in Ahmed, 2017, p. 213). She aligns more with Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp in their acknowledgement that within the American women's liberation movement "lifestyle politics were extensively connected to political struggle and direct action" (Robinson, 2022, p. 109; see also Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Closer to home, Robinson draws from Barbara Baird to advance a positive assessment of lesbian feminism in Australia:

> The radical feminist push of the women's refuge movement … has been dominated by lesbians, as have the women's peace camps of the 1980s in Australia and the US, and the large non-Indigenous organising team for the First International Indigenous Women's Conference in Adelaide in 1989 was almost entirely lesbian. (Baird, 2001, as cited in Robinson, 2022, p. 109)

At the same time as she mobilises Baird to reject a dichotomy between lifestyle and politics, Robinson nevertheless associates radical feminism with lesbian separatism, an association she implicitly reinforces through her use of terms like "utopia" and "ideal" (2022, pp. 108-119). She pushes back against the narrative that downplays, if not outright dismisses, questions about how to relate to others—including the question of whether to relate to men at all. Paying close attention to context means, according to Robinson, seeing lesbian separatism as a conjunctural expression of socialist, gay liberation and radical feminist politics. In her view, it is not the case that lesbian separatists in Australia de-emphasised politics in favour of lifestyle. It is rather the case that lesbian separatists used their political ideals as a guide for how to arrange their personal lives, the very demarcation between which they understood as patriarchal mystification. In her words:

> In Australia where Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation emerged as part of and divergent from leftist and union-based movements that were uniquely thriving in Australia at the time, Australian lesbian feminist utopianism blended this socialist politics of collectivism and structural critique alongside radical feminist visions of women-centered autonomous communities, as well as a belief in strategy of separatism and creating safe celebratory spaces for exploring lesbian sexuality. (Robinson, 2022, p. 108)

If “radical” is taken to mean, as Fahs (2024, p. 480) puts it, “a process of getting to the roots of something, digging deeper and deeper in order to understand a system, structure or phenomenon,” then, in Robinson’s estimation, lesbian separatism is a more, rather than less, radical feminist politics.

Debating pornography

From the 1980s, radical feminist questions about sexuality gave way to heated debates over pornography. Displaying again the entanglement between Western (con)texts, Jane Campbell (1988) examines American feminist anti-pornography campaigns in an essay for *Australian Feminist Studies*. This American focus is justified, in her view, as much by the fact that “there are similar divisions in Australia” as by the fact that “the most vociferous feminist anti-pornography campaigning has been centred in the United States of America” (Campbell, 1988, p. 156). Following Willis (1984, p. 112), who connects a shift in focus in 1970s radical feminism away from political struggle to a shift in focus in 1980s radical feminism away from actual violence against women towards “representation[s] of sexual violence in the media,” Campbell evaluates the centrality accorded pornography in 1980s radical feminism. Campbell criticises feminists who concentrate their campaigning efforts on pornography—who, like Willis, she refers to as cultural feminists—for failing to distinguish between images of violence and acts of violence, and for framing pornography not as one symptom of women’s low social status among many, but rather, and to the detriment of feminist politics, as an exceptional site of women’s oppression (1988, pp. 159-161).

Far from expressing the scepticism towards the state that is often associated with radical feminism, premised on the idea that trying to reform patriarchal institutions is futile, the 1980s was a decade in which radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine

MacKinnon tried to have pornography censored by forging an unlikely alliance with conservatives. Campbell describes their feminist anti-pornography campaign as follows:

> In 1983, Andrea Dworkin and feminist lawyer Catharine MacKinnon, two of the major theorists of the feminist anti-pornography campaigns, drafted an ordinance embodying the idea that pornography violates women's civil rights. The ordinance passed (though not yet implemented) in Indianapolis, would give women the right to file a claim of sex discrimination if they felt they had been harmed by pornography. (1988, p. 159)

While she accepts that passing anti-pornography laws might have some feminist effects, Campbell warns against feminists tethering themselves to an apparatus that has so often been the cause of women's oppression rather than their liberation, claiming that "the legal system is by no means a neutral agent in the history of women's oppression" (1988, p. 160). By choosing to enter into a marriage of convenience with "the anti-feminist and anti-social welfare" New Right, she suggests, which "at the centre of its political programme has sexual, reproductive and family issues," 1980s cultural feminists (under which umbrella she includes not only Dworkin and MacKinnon, but also Susan Brownmiller and Susan Griffin) end up advancing a similarly "moralistic and reductionist" position (Campbell, 1988, p. 159).

From my historical vantage point, Campbell's critique of cultural feminism recalls Angela McRobbie's (2009) account of how regressive gendered ideas regained cultural prominence in the UK, in particular from the 1990s onwards, and partly through conservative political projects strategically deploying feminist ideas. Dworkin and MacKinnon's willingness

to forge an alliance with the Right is expressive of the process that McRobbie calls feminist "disarticulation," which forecloses a radical feminist imaginary:

> If the politics of articulation entails this constant struggle over meaning, then the antagonistic forces which I have been describing have been mobilised to negate or shut down the political imaginary of a radical feminism as a source of political wisdom, which might provide the tools for women to imagine an alternative world to that which is now available to them. My argument so far is that women are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism. (2009, p. 26)

McRobbie distinguishes the 1960s and 70s UK women's movement from its US counterpart on the grounds that it had stronger ties to socialist struggles (2009, p. 26). She claims that "much more so than in the US" the UK women's liberation movement drew on "the repertoire of class struggle, but also modified this through challenging its productivism, its patriarchalism and the over-determination of class, with the effect that sexuality, race and ethnicity were always to be subsumed within the overarching logic of class" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 26). However, McRobbie argues that there has been a profound undoing of feminism in the UK, beginning in the 1980s and becoming culturally embedded in the 1990s. This undoing can be seen across several sites of cultural production. Most obvious is the rise of neoliberalism, otherwise called economic rationalism, the dominance of which McRobbie suggests is visible through its invisibility. Cuts to social provision, including to "irrelevant" feminist curricula, were justified by New Labour governments as a neutral and rational decision rather than motivated by political ideology (2009, p. 30; see also Duggan, 2003). The undoing of feminism was also expressed in academic disciplines: in the tendency, for example, of "new" sociologists (such as Ulrich Beck, Elizabeth Beck-Gernscheim, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash) to explain

changes in women's economic status as mostly the result of market logic rather than as, as McRobbie argues, hard won from struggles for women's liberation (2009, p. 43). As McRobbie puts it, in these sociologists' work "it is implied that the changes which have occurred for women have come about in some kind of pain-free transition. Capitalism has produced the need for, and the possibility of, women's liberation" (2009, p. 43).

Making a related, although different point to McRobbie, Campbell argues that like conservatives, cultural feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon assume that male sexuality is inherently violent or, more precisely, "that there is some inner sexual essence, healthy in women and unhealthy in men" (1988, p. 163). She describes conservatives as aiming to steer male sexuality in the direction of marriage, Christian morality and procreation, while cultural feminist treated heterosexual sex as a synonym for rape (Campbell, 1988, p. 162). Similarly to Atkinson's and the *Radicalesbians'* indictment of heterosexuality, for example, Dworkin (1981, p. 176) asserts that "there is no male conception of sex without force as the essential dynamic," while Brownmiller (1975, p. 16) claims, in her writing on prehistory, that "the human male was a natural predator and the human female served as his natural prey" (see also Campbell, 1988, p. 162). For this reason, despite having vastly different ideals, feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon argue that in order to control male sexuality the state needs to severely curtail access to pornographic materials, if not censor them entirely. Despite the differences between the conservative and feminist anti-pornography positions, Campbell argues that both ultimately eschew "complex historical analysis" in favour of assuming that "men's urge to dominate women" is inevitable (1988, pp. 162-163).

In "The Mirror of Pornography" (1995/2020) Wendy Brown's critique of MacKinnon's essentialist and a-historical focus on pornography also resonates with Campbell's critique of cultural feminists. More acerbic in tone than Campbell, Brown argues that

> MacKinnon's move to read gender off of pornography, her construction of a social theory of gender that mirrors heterosexual male pornography, not only convenes a pervasively, totally, and singly determined gendered subject, it encodes the pornographic age as the truth rather than the hyperbole of gender production … In arguing that "pornography literally means what it says," MacKinnon not only begs questions about the workings of representation and fantasy, of hermeneutics and interpellation, she ontologizes pornography as gender. (1995/2020, pp. 87-88)

Though Brown avoids mention of "cultural feminism," she deploys similar terms to those Willis and Echols use against cultural feminists, contending that for MacKinnon, "there are men and women, dominators and dominated, exploiters and exploited, social systems and social wholes" (1995/2020, p. 92). Campbell, who does employ the term "cultural feminist," agrees with Willis, Echols and Brown, arguing that the problem with cultural feminism is that it advances, under the sign of radical feminism, an essentialist vision of men that forecloses the possibility of transforming gendered relations. For Campbell, cultural feminism overstates the oppressive force of pornography because of its despair and attendant lack of ambition. Brown also uses the word "despair" to characterise MacKinnon, suggesting that her

> putative radicalism simultaneously sustains the pleasure of the familiar, the pleasure of the illicit, the pleasure of moralizing against the illicit, and the comforts of conservatism—gender is eternal and sexual pleasure is opprobrious—in an era of despair about substantive political transformation. (1995/2020, p. 91)

While Campbell claims neither to condone how women are represented in pornography nor to be "blind to the psychic and social connections between male violence and

the sexual and social oppression of women," she opposes cultural feminist anti-pornography campaigning on the basis that it "just isn't good politics" (1995/2020, p. 166). Rather than a myopic focus on pornography, she argues that feminists should instead take a "deeper look" at how women are represented in patriarchal societies through analysis of "the ways in which all sexist imagery, both in language and in pictures, uses women's bodies for men's titillation" (Campbell, 1988, p. 166). Like Willis and Echols—but unlike Brown (1995/2020), who distances herself from "modernist feminists" of all persuasions—Campbell refuses to hand over the label "radical feminist" to cultural feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon:

> In directing their energies against 'pornography' as an isolated form of representation, cultural feminists allow (encourage) a polarisation between the sexual nature of women and men. Thus a more radical feminist critique of sexual oppression and the social construction of difference gets lost in a critique of male supremacy [and directed towards] male behaviour. Men are seen as the enemy by virtue of their maleness rather than because of the power that a patriarchal system gives them. This results in what I regard as an effectively limited political action. (1988, p. 165)

According to Campbell, cultural feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon mistake one symptom of patriarchy for its ultimate cause. By her argument, then, despite their claims to the contrary, cultural feminists are not very radical at all.

Debating the state

1980s radical feminist debates on pornography were controversial, including within these circles themselves. This is partly because they were in a debate about whether and how feminists should work with the state. Robinson highlights a contextual difference between

Australia, the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) concerning the state relevant to this discussion. Unlike the US and UK governments, which were "both conservative and right-wing," from 1983 to 1991 the Australian Federal government "was headed by Labor Party leader Bob Hawke," meaning that in Australia "institutional support for feminism continued and even intensified during the 1980s and into the 1990s" (2022, p. 110). Though this institutional support was uneven due to the rise of neoliberalism/economic rationalism, Robinson claims that it nevertheless shows how a story of "lesbian feminism as flourishing in the 1970s [and] losing momentum by the 1990s" is reductive, in part because it doesn't account for the enduring impact of "transnational exchanges of lesbian feminist ideas, activism, and indeed women, between Australia, the US and UK" (2022, pp. 109-110).

While Robinson associates support from the Australian Labor Party (ALP) with lesbian feminism's influence, many scholars have criticised the ALP for capturing the energy of feminist activism and redirecting it towards limited bureaucratic ends (see, for example, Andrew and Maddison, 2010; Baird, 2010; Connell, 2014). That said, it is generally acknowledged that ALP governments facilitated, with substantial feminist pressure from inside and outside its ranks, improvements in women's status in Australia. Connell claims, for example, that "the Labor Party provided some political protection for feminism, and through the state, provided one of feminism's key means of action in Australia" (2014, p. 217). For her part, too, Michelle Arrow suggests that there was a "convergence between activist movements and social democratic Labor governments, who expanded their class-based vision of equality to encompass women's rights, and later, gay and lesbian rights" (2021, p. 334). Australian governments being relatively amenable to feminism also affected the meaning of "radical feminist" throughout this period. Though by no means two completely distinct groupings, there is something of a mythologised split over radicalism in histories of Australian feminism between feminists who pursued what came to be known as "state feminism" or the "femocratic strategy" by working with the state, on the one hand, and, on the other, feminists who had a

more cynical stance towards the notion of achieving progress is achievable through such avenues (see Eisenstein, 1996). Many feminists from the first camp were members of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), which was initially formed "to conduct candidate questionnaires for the 1972 federal election" but then "continued to pursue changes through government machinery and policy" (Andrew, 2008, p. 373). Women involved in the more diverse and decentralised grouping, commonly referred to simply as "women's liberation," opted more to participate in consciousness-raising circles, engage in direct action and public protest and, in some cases, even set up women's refuges and health centres (see Andrew, 2008, p. 373). While reflecting on her own position as a "femocrat," Hester Eisenstein claims in *Inside Agitators* that

> the debate over the femocracy touched on some classic issues about social change: the relation between social movements and mainstream politics; the role of the state: the relations between capitalism and patriarchy; the intersections of race, class, and gender; and the tension between reformist and revolutionary strategies. (1996, p. xvi)

This split over the more and less radical strands of feminism in Australia might seem straightforward but, as Merrindahl Andrew points out, many women who throughout the late 1960s-80s identified as radical feminists later acknowledged that they had actually functioned more as liberal feminists—or "femocrats" in the parlance of the period. Val Marsden of WEL Western Australia expresses this in her interview with Andrew. Reflecting on the kinds of strategies that she and her sisters pursued, Marsden states:

> Thinking about the different kinds of feminism that we've since become aware of … like radical feminism, liberal feminism and socialist feminism … I suppose in our heads we were more radical feminists, we recognised that patriarchy was the problem, we

> couldn't wait to overturn patriarchy to get changes made [but] we were working more as liberal feminists … seeing that we needed to make change through policy and through the legal structure in order to achieve equality for women—better educational access and legal equality. (as cited in Andrew, 2008, p. 379)

Even Elizabeth Reid identified as a radical feminist, despite the fact that as the first Women's Adviser, appointed by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1973, she literally worked "within the government for reformist goals, a hallmark of the supposedly 'liberal' feminist of later criticism" (Andrew, 2008, p. 379). What this shows, as Andrew points out, is that the gap between how feminists in Australia understood themselves at the height of the WLM, and how they were understood by others, including other feminists, destabilises a standard "typology distinguishing liberal, radical, and socialist feminism" (2008, p. 379).

How radical feminist positions in Australia responded to the "man" question during this period is also complicated, especially when "radical feminist" is taken to mean anyone who identified as such, regardless of the strategies they enacted. As Anne Summers (2000) describes in her memoir *Ducks on the Pond*, in the early 1970s feminist women across Australia discussed the extent to which, or even whether, men should be allowed to participate in women's liberation. This discussion extended to the male partners, lovers, friends and even children of the women involved in the movement, and applied to meetings, consciousness-raising circles and conferences. As Summers also acknowledges, however, different sections of the women's liberation movement expressed different degrees of antagonism towards men. Reflecting on her experience at the 1970 national conference in Melbourne, Summers recalls being met with profound hostility after mentioning that in Adelaide men sometimes attended women's liberation meetings (2000, p. 263). In 1973, the *Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter* insisted that the movement's success depended on maintaining an exclusively

female, “no-men allowed” policy (see Robinson, 2013, para. 6). For Verity Burgmann, this desire for female-only feminist organising spaces was a partly justified reaction to the male chauvinism rampant on the left at the time (2003, pp. 107-109). In fact, reminiscent of the “politico-feminist split” within *New York Radical Women,* women’s liberation in Australia at least partly emerged from a split with the New Left. To cite Robinson again:

> While in its early days women’s liberation supported a dialogue and alliance with male comrades of mixed New Left groups, and with gay liberation, in an effort to overthrow capitalist structures, women’s liberation developed a distinctly radical and gender-specific consciousness by 1975. (2013, para. 8)

The Australian New Left has similarities with the UK New Left. Stuart Hall (2010) discusses the UK New Left as emerging in 1960 on the first editorial board of *The New Left Review*. This editorial board was made up of Oxford students (including Hall himself) who edited *Universities and Left Review*, and former Communist Party members, many of whom at the time were involved in *New Reasoner* popular front politics (2010, para. 18). For Hall, it would therefore “be quite wrong to attempt to reconstruct, retrospectively, some essential ‘New Left’, and to impose on it a political unity it never possessed” (2010, para. 19). That said, this iteration of the UK New Left has identifiable contours:

> Far from constituting a modest updating exercise, this was a far-reaching, ambitious and multifaceted intellectual project. So far as socialism was concerned, it meant coming to terms with the depressing experiences of both “actual existing socialism” and “actual existing social democracy” and transforming, in the light of those experiences, the very conception of “the political”. (Hall, 2010, para. 20)

While the Australian New Left arguably also has its roots as a response to the actions of the Soviet Union (see Curthoys, 1988, p. 21), like the UK New Left, the Australian New Left is strongly associated with 1968, the year that student-led mass movements took place across the world, notably France, Mexico and the US. Also associated with the Australian New Left is the anti-Vietnam War movement (see Curthoys, 1992, p. 116). The New Left, in the UK as in Australia, marks something of a departure from structuralist theories of socialism. Nevertheless, it is clear that feminists often opted to organise for women's liberation in ways that restricted men's involvement because of the persistence of sexism among left-wing men (see Curthoys, 1992, p. 131). Zelda D'Aprano, for example, has criticised the Communist Party of Australia for its male chauvinism well into the late 1960s and 1970s (see Robinson, 2013, para. 18). Communist men expressed this chauvinism partly by assigning their female comrades the tasks of copying leaflets and making coffee (see Robinson, 2013, para. 18). Gay liberation activists like Dennis Altman (1979) have also alluded to the dragging masculinism of the Australian New Left. Robinson summarises this shared position among feminists and gay liberation activists as follows:

> [While] New Left politics helped inspire a new radicalism in Australian society, indicated by a rebellious youth-culture and experimentation with new sexual behaviours (though mainly in a heterosexual context), it would take women's liberation and gay liberation movements to pose a more radical challenge to conventional understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. (2013, para. 21)

Whether in Australia, the US or the UK, radical feminist positions throughout the late 1960s-1980s tended to emphasise the political necessity of refusing—or, at the very least, restricting—men's involvement in feminism. In the case of cultural feminists, this was based

on the belief that only an autonomous organising model could valorise a woman-identified culture, the assumed political value of which itself derived from the assumption that the problems posed by sexual difference were insurmountable. This assumption was criticised by feminists of several tendencies at the time, including other radical feminists, who argued that cultural feminist despair about men was politically limiting.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to further contextualise the heteropessimism of popular feminism by looking back at Western radical feminism, particularly of the 1970s but including discussion of decades that followed. In the chapters that follow, I want to carry into my analysis of popular feminism's orthodox and dissident modes an attention to radical feminist "positions" rather than "the" (feminist) subject, along with an awareness that some of the key concerns of this radical feminism remain key concerns of both modes of popular feminism and, furthermore, overlap in important ways with key concerns of the manosphere. I also want to bear in mind two observations on "radical feminism": first, radical feminists held a range of positions towards the "man"; second, these positions tended to centre on notions of inherent antagonism between men and women. The orthodox and dissident feminisms I now turn to do not always explicitly invoke radical feminism, but the centrality of questions about antagonism towards men in radical feminist positions provides a frame for understanding their heteropessimistic ideas, images and conclusions. However, one of the things that marks a break in this tradition is the set of cultural changes that give rise to the manosphere and the prevalence of examples from the manosphere in contemporary popular feminism's positions on men.

Chapter Three:
Orthodox feminism

> … A boy who's nice that breathes
>
> I swear he's nowhere to be seen.
>
> — Sabrina Carpenter, "Slim Pickins"

Introduction

With my previous discussions of radical feminism and the manosphere in mind, over the next two chapters I turn to analysis of contemporary Western heteropessimistic feminisms. This third chapter begins with a discussion of the term "popular culture" through close engagement with Stuart Hall's work. Following this, I highlight two shared features of some significant recent battles between popular feminism and popular misogyny in "Western" culture. First, these battles have been characterised, especially since 2018, by spectacular expressions of misogyny enjoying institutional backing at the highest levels. Second, they demonstrate the emergence of two modes of popular feminism that express a prevailing heteropessimism that is continuous with the debates around radical feminism I explored in chapter two.

One cultural field that is particularly important to these battles is the popular feminist trade book. This is not a new genre, with benchmark "second wave" precursors like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971) being followed in the 1990s by highly visible and commercially successful U.S. publications by writers including Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, Susan Faludi, and Rebecca Walker that set standards for a genre in which feminist "blockbuster" texts contested feminism as much as patriarchy (see Stringer, 2014; Taylor, 2017). Today this visibility and diversity is even clearer, and I will draw here in particular on popular feminist trade publications that extract insights about "man" as general social category by citing examples from the manosphere. Heteropessimistic modes of popular feminism, which I call "orthodox" and "dissident," differ

greatly, yet both involve notions of inherent antagonism between men and women. And like many radical feminist positions before them, both are resistant to seeing men as potential collaborators in feminist struggles. In chapter four, I will argue that dissident feminism—identified with Nina Power's *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Louise Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* (2023a)—articulates an alignment with the manosphere. My focus in this third chapter, however, is orthodox feminism, which I evaluate through analysis of Kate Manne's *Down Girl* (2017) and *Entitled* (2020), Laurie Penny's *Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* (2021). Despite expressing gendered antagonisms in fairly standard progressive and intersectional feminist terms, I argue that orthodox feminism evinces a politically limiting despair about men through its substantial use of the manosphere to represent men and that, in so doing, reinforces the influence of popular misogyny.

Deploying critical discourse analysis, as outlined in the introduction, and bearing in mind my discussion of both "positions" (rather than subjects) and context in the preceding chapter, I read these selected texts not as discrete objects but as cultural products that "say something" about the contexts in which they are embedded. I have chosen these (con)texts listed not only because they are all "feminist" in the sense that the authors identify their work as such, but because they all have a complex relationship with the "popular." More specifically, I have chosen these specific texts as intersecting three important features of contemporary popular feminist publishing. Despite being published by academic or academic-adjacent presses and being written by feminists with some past or present connection to institutional academic settings, these are trade books not addressed exclusively to scholarly peers or fields but rather to a popular audience. All of these texts are also engaged exclusively with "Western" gendered relations, especially with the United States and the United Kingdom, a fact which itself reveals much about the dynamic between popularity and feminism. I have also chosen these texts as direct contemporaries articulating with a particular "historical conjuncture" (Hall, 1992b, p. 83). Each was published soon after Donald Trump was first elected President

of the United States, in a(nother) period of change for popular feminism, which, as Jilly Boyce Kay notes, "began to take shape within media culture from 2018 onwards" (2024, p. 2). Lawrence Grossberg emphasises the fact that a conjuncture is "not a time or a period but a moment defined by an accumulation/condensation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances" (2006, p. 5). Across this and the next chapter, I elucidate some of the contradictions, patterns and preoccupations revealing of the terms in which feminists are encouraged to speak about men in this current "moment."

In 1996, Rosalind Gill, cautioned that the very "idea of a feminist orthodoxy" risks playing "into the hands of our critics—by reinforcing their conviction that feminism is a rigid, dogmatic line to which strict adherence is required, and which silences or marginalizes dissenters from the orthodoxy" (p. 124). Here, I describe the mode of popular feminism that Manne, Penny and Srinivasan exemplify as "orthodox" not because I believe they demand "strict adherence" from other feminists but rather because they represent a common approach to men within contemporary Western popular feminist culture. I am using "common" in Hall's sense (following Gramsci) of having a kind of "taken-forgrantedness," of having the power to define the terms in which certain claims are usually or regularly made (1979, p. 384). "Orthodox" is a term that I use as a way of acknowledging the fact that scepticism about extending sympathy to men is popular among feminists and, increasingly, is popular *as* feminism. In this chapter, I argue that orthodox feminism reinforces heteropessimism and, thereby, the influence that misogyny exerts over the terrain of Western popular culture. My analysis has a particular focus on tensions pertaining to men, masculinity and male violence.

Popular culture

In this section, I demonstrate the importance of seeing the texts I discuss in both this chapter and chapter four as forms of popular culture. In "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" Hall writes:

> Popular culture is neither, in a "pure" sense, the popular traditions of resistance to

> these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked. In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it. (1981, p. 348)

Popular culture, Hall argues, is neither purely how the dominant class reproduces its power through ideological dissemination nor the authentic resistant culture of the dominated class. It is rather the terrain on which the respective constitutions of the dominant and dominated classes are continuously contested. Before arriving at this nuanced conceptualisation, Hall first scrutinises and rejects several alternatives, including the commonsense notion that popular culture reflects the preferences of "the masses," in other words, that things become popular because lots of people like them. This marketised understanding, which frames popular culture as a matter, ultimately, of supply and demand, elides how popular culture involves manipulation and partly functions to maintain the hierarchical relationship between the dominant and dominated classes, which in turn effects a "debasement of the culture of the people" (Hall, 1981, p. 351). Despite himself rejecting this, Hall also pointedly criticises the basis on which some (other) socialists reject the commonsense notion. To see popular culture as the standardisation of the masses is flawed, for Hall, because "working people" are clearly amongst those who enjoy the "cultural products of the … modern cultural industry" (1981, p. 352). In other words, to understand popular culture as some socialists do, as merely a manifestation of manipulation on the part of the dominant class over the dominated class, is to imply that working people are either a debased part of a debased whole or else "cultural dupes," doomed forever to remain in a state of "false consciousness" (Hall, 1981, p. 352). Both of these options position working people as passive, thereby undermining the possibility of the socialist politics Hall desired.

While it is incorrect, according to Hall, to see cultural power as imprinting and thereby effectively constructing people's minds, it is equally incorrect to believe that there are parts of

popular culture where people are free from the influence of cultural power. The substantial power of the cultural industry is demonstrated by its ability to repeat representations that "fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture," through which it seeks to (re)work, (re)orient and, ultimately, (re)define how people understand themselves, others and the world around them (Hall, 1981, p. 353). However, there must always already be something for the cultural industry to attempt to capture, something in which people recognise themselves and identify with on their own terms. The "popular" even as represented by the cultural industry is thus always mediated by competing forces:

> It is a highly complex species of linguistic ventriloquism in which the debased brutalism of popular journalism is skillfully combined and intricated with some elements of the directness and vivid particularity of working-class language. It cannot get by without preserving some element of its roots in a real vernacular: in "the popular". (Hall, 1981, p. 354)

Refusing to conceptualise popular culture as either the byproduct of a totalising relation of domination or the mere amalgam of individual expressions of agency, Hall's model is particularly useful to my consideration of the relations between orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism. His sensitivity to the interplay between social conditions and human agency avoids unproductive pessimism, which he describes in "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" as a "zero-sum cultural game" and a "'nothing ever changes, the system always wins' attitude" (Hall, 1992b, p. 86). Margaret Henderson and Anthea Taylor (2019) echo the principled optimism Hall displays in their book, *Postfeminism in Context*:

> Rather than conceptualising postfeminism primarily as a way in which feminism is merely "taken into account" so that it can be disavowed, as in Angela McRobbie's (2009) formulation, we engage … what Rachel Wood and Benjamin Litherland (2018, p. 906) describe as "a paradigm of critical feminist hope" that "allows feminist media scholars to recognize moments of possibility that can arise from the encounter of popular feminism and neoliberalism". (p. 3)

Like Henderson and Taylor, Hall is clear that maintaining hope is a prerequisite for political struggle. This does not, however, mean that he shies away from emphasising the power of the cultural industry. Nor do Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg (2020) in their co-authored article about the social conditions in and through which Western feminisms emerge and operate. They argue forcefully that "media and entertainment platforms are conditioning the content of feminism (among other things), so that business models end up conditioning the types of feminist expressions that we see" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 12).

In a similar vein, I do not wish to see either orthodox or dissident modes of popular feminism as expressing straightforward ideological positions, although they are written from particular always interested feminist positions. Precisely because of their popularity, drawing on Hall, it would be simplistic to see either total feminist victory or total feminist incorporation in these positions. I take Hall's work as encouraging us, in this case, to see both these modes of popular feminism as simultaneously reflecting and producing tensions around the relations between feminism, men, masculinity and misogyny. Far from effecting a quietism or obfuscating productive political analysis, however, Hall's insistence on what he calls popular culture's "double-movement" serves to destabilise any shallow politics premised on mutually exclusive, essential identities. To borrow his words again:

> Name calling merely reflects the particular model of cultural politics to which we remain attached, precisely, the zero-sum game—our model replacing their model, our identities in place of their identities—what Antonio Gramsci called culture as a once-and-for-all "war of manoeuvre," when, in fact, the only game in town worth playing is the game of cultural "wars of position". (Hall, 1992b, p. 87)

Though Hall agrees with bell hooks that "a touch of" essentialism is sometimes needed, ironically, to emphasise non-essential yet material differences, and with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that "strategic essentialism" has its place, he does not mince words about the

limitations of essentialism (1992b, p. 91). As it manifests in the black cultural politics of the 1990s, for example, he is rather scathing:

> The moment the signifier "black" is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct. In addition, as always happens when we naturalize historical categories (think about gender and sexuality), we fix that signifier outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. And once it is fixed, we are tempted to use "black" as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner—as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something's black or not. (Hall, 1992b, p. 91)

Hall thus indicates that moving beyond a zero-sum cultural game should involve a critique of essentialism, but that simply providing such a critique is not enough. As he sees it, to "diagnose the problem" without considering the "cultural strategies that can make a difference" is to remain within the very framework that must be surpassed (Hall, 1992b, p. 86). This is a prompt both to evaluate the essentialism about men found in orthodox and dissident feminisms, but also to consider the possible relations that men can (and already do) have with feminism that are under- or un- represented in these modes of popular feminism. In this chapter and the next, I critically evaluate orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism, setting aside for now the question of hope to which I will return in chapter five.

Another element of Hall's work worth emphasising here is his contention that popular culture cannot be separated from the relationship between cultural apparatuses and "the people" (1981, p. 350). Hall writes about the concurrent destruction of "the indigenous radical and working-class press" and the emergence of a distinctly working-class audience for a "popular, commercial press" in nineteenth century England (p. 35). He argues that it would be insufficient to consider this change merely a product of "culture" narrowly understood as

"the prevailing ideas of a time" (Hall, 1981, p. 350). It's particularly relevant to the examples of popular feminism I discuss in this thesis that Hall details how the qualitative expansion of the popular, commercial press in England facilitated the dissemination of ideas about "our democratic way of life" and "us" preferred by the owners of those cultural institutions (1981, p. 351). In his view, this cultural apparatus "organised by capital 'for' the working classes" effected a profound, but in no respect total, capture of the definitions through which members of the dominated class could understand themselves (Hall, 1981, p. 351). The fact that the popular press has made much room for "feminism," exemplified by but not limited to the genre of the popular feminist trade book, has influenced cultural understandings of "feminism" (see McDermott, 1995).

Similarly concerned with the relationship between media and politics, Alan Finlayson discusses how contemporary technological affordances are serving to extend the influence of those he calls "ideological entrepreneurs" (2021, p. 172). I will return to Finlayson's work in my discussion of dissident feminism. For now, though, it is enough to state that for him, digital communication creates "a 'marketplace of ideas' within which an increasing range of conservative and reactionary ideologies may compete for a share of success" (Finlayson, 2021, p. 172). This is another crucial context for the divergent modes of popular feminism in the present conjuncture. As Banet-Weiser argues, the kinds of feminist expressions that enjoy wide circulation across the West are mediated by the contemporary cultural industry, which is thereby also mediating people's understanding of "feminism." She emphasises the fact that media, technological and economic culture in the West are increasingly characterised by clicks, "likes" and the circulation of "content," and that this facilitates the visibility of—which is to say, produces—certain kinds of feminism at the expense of others (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 21-22). Despite the validity of emphasising digital media in this way, and indeed in any discussion of the manosphere, the popular feminist trade book also offers a valuable way of seeing this cultural shift. This genre is important because it calls attention to the continuities of feminist positions taken towards men from at least the 1970s. These continuities exist not only in the kinds of arguments that are made about men, but also in the popular feminist trade

book itself as a genre circulating feminist ideas. The ideas I discuss do not inhere only *in* the texts of my chosen authors. Orthodox and dissident feminists also spread their ideas and cultivate popularity across a range of digital media—podcasts, YouTube channels, Twitter/X, substacks and online magazines. The fact that they write books also lends them authority, I would suggest, positioning them, as Kay might put it, as part of the "intellectual wing" of their respective version of popular feminism (2024, p. 4). The final and perhaps most obvious benefit of analysing popular feminist culture through books (besides the fact that I like reading books) is that they offer a systematic articulation of key arguments.

Over this and the next chapter, I will identify and evaluate orthodox and dissident feminisms as modes of popular feminism by attending to their constitutive contradictions as (con)texts. On the one hand, both modes express ideas that are "popular" in part due to their accordant relationship with prevailing institutional formations. On the other hand, the books I focus on here are material objects entangled with the institutional formations that they serve to legitimise. Conceptualising popular culture as the continuous struggle over definitions of who "we" are, after Hall, is useful for reading these modes of popular feminism as (con)texts. That is, I read these books not as discrete texts but as a cultural genre that tells us about emerging understandings of "feminism," and the role(s) men can/should have in it. Hall's claim that "by definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space" is just as true for feminist popular culture—though not, of course, true in just the same way (1992b, p. 88). I turn now to considering how popular feminist culture is by definition a contradictory space, especially regarding questions about men, masculinity and misogyny.

Popular feminism, heteropessimism, radical feminism

There is a growing scholarly literature on popular feminism, in which the work of Banet-Weiser is influential and exemplary. In *Empowered* (2018), for example, Banet-Weiser argues that contemporary popular feminism incorporates neoliberal tenets of entrepreneurialism and individualism through assertions that women "can do" things: can become a CEO, can work

in STEM, can be an astronaut or elite sports star (p. 4). In *Empowered* (2018), Banet- Weiser aptly describes the ways in which popular feminism often foregrounds representations of individualised change (as personal empowerment) at the expense of material analysis and structural change. Popular feminism of this kind dovetails with what Diane Negra and Hamah Hannad (2020) call "plutocratic feminism," which, actively hostile to even minor reform, aims to parade a few women as figureheads of a fundamentally corrupt system. Sheryl Sandberg, former META Chief Operating Officer and author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and The Will to Lead* (2013) is one such figurehead.

Although Banet-Weiser builds upon the now vast body of scholarship on postfeminism, at first glance, post- and popular feminism appear to be mutually exclusive. In Angela McRobbie's (2009) famous phrasing, post-feminism involves a "repudiation" of feminism, while popular feminism embraces it. Yet the popular feminism as conceived by Banet-Weiser actually further entrenches what McRobbie, or Gill, and many others after them would call post-feminist logics, despite holding an ostensibly different position towards feminism. According to Banet-Weiser, highly visible feminisms tend to emphasise, similarly to the post-feminist notion of "girl power," women's "empowerment, confidence, capacity and competence" (2018, p. 20). One important difference between post- and popular- feminist contexts, then, is that a post-feminist context assumes that feminism must pose a challenge to capitalism—which is why it must be repudiated—while in popular feminism a mode of

"feminism" can be embraced because it is entirely compatible with notions of neoliberal success.

Catherine Rottenberg takes up the question of just how compatible feminism and neoliberalism can be in her book, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018). Rottenberg claims that "neoliberal feminism" (her account of which is similar to Banet-Weiser's popular feminism) emerges as an attempt to reconcile the contradiction between neoliberalism as an economic system, and neoliberalism as a political rationality (2018, pp. 7-8). While neoliberalism as an economic system needs reproductive labour to replenish human capital, neoliberalism as a political rationality reduces everything to market metrics and therefore eschews the value of reproduction (Rottenberg, 2018, pp. 7-8). Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism presents an attempt (however meagre) to resist "the total conversion of educated and upwardly mobile women into generic human capital" (2018, p. 8). It does this by affirming that women can be capital-enhancing agents equal to men while, at the same time, carving out space for reproductive labour. Neoliberal feminism is thus premised on the idea, as is the popular feminism on which Banet-Weiser focuses, that women "can do" it all.[13]

The orthodox and dissident feminist (con)texts I evaluate in this thesis do not entirely conform to Banet-Weiser's paradigmatic manifestations of "popular feminism." They also differ from the descriptions of plutocratic and neoliberal feminisms above because they *do* express desire for structural changes. Orthodox feminism expresses desire for the end of gender inequality, patriarchal social conditioning at large, and even sometimes capitalism. Dissident feminism expresses desire for an imaginary past organised more strictly around the gender binary. Although orthodox and dissident feminisms differ from Banet-Weiser's paradigmatic manifestation of popular feminism, popular feminism remains a useful framework for examining them. This is because, and Banet-Weiser is clear about this, popular

[13] Anita Harris discusses how similar ideas of capacity and confidence also produce an ideal "can-do" girlhood in *Future girl: Young women in the twenty-first century* (2014).

feminism is not a set of characteristics. Popular feminism is rather a framework through which to make sense of ideas made in the name of feminism that enjoy visibility, influence and dominance over and above others partly because they align with prevailing institutional formations (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4). Understood as such, popular feminism will necessarily have multiple, at times contradictory, manifestations. Since the ideas that orthodox and dissident feminisms reflect and reproduce about men are highly visible in Western culture, the "popular feminism" framework can help make sense of them. My choice to delineate between orthodox feminism and dissident feminism, rather than to talk of popular feminism more broadly, relates in part to the media circuits in which they are most visible.

The popular feminist trade books I discuss below are all themselves entangled in digital media circuits. Orthodox feminism, on which I will focus most of this chapter, frequently appears in mainstream print and digital media. Dissident feminism, which I attend to more closely in chapter four, circulates primarily within self-declared subversive, contrarian, or otherwise anti-politically-correct media. In chapter four, I will argue that dissident feminism is part of the network that Finlayson (2021; 2022) calls reactionary digital politics (see also Kay, 2024). Orthodox feminism, which I am exemplifying here with the work of Kate Manne, Laurie Penny and Amia Srinivasan, has several defining features. It invokes the concept of "patriarchy" to explain why the credibility of women's speech is undermined in Western culture, both on- and offline; it articulates a commitment to intersectional feminism; it is trans-inclusive; it claims that men can technically act to dismantle patriarchy yet expresses despair about the likelihood of them actually doing so; it criticises men's entitlement to, and objectification of, women; and, it is sceptical about the political effects of extending sympathy to men. By contrast, dissident feminism advocates more conservative social values, at the heart of which lie transphobia, and the naturalisation if not idealisation of the nuclear family and the gender binary. Dissident feminists, or reactionary feminists, as Kay calls them, are "a key part of the broader turn to openly rejecting 'liberal,' 'progressive,' or 'girlboss' feminisms within popular and political culture" (2024, p. 2). The dissident feminists I will discuss in the next chapter also criticise other feminists for refusing to accept the "reality" that men and

women are “naturally” different. Though they might at first glance seem to be aligned with critical feminist scholarship on neoliberalism and postfeminism, their argument that “liberal” or “progressive” feminists, in particular, are responsible for instigating a “sex war” against men, serves to position women as highly skilled risk managers who are responsible for ending the sexual violence of which they are disproportionately victims. Dissident feminists thereby reproduce the very neoliberal logic they also criticise. At a fundamental level, they advance a profoundly despairing vision of men based on, to borrow Kay’s words again, “bio-essentialist conceptions of gender” and “an aggressive sense of fatalism,” which she conceptualises, drawing on Raymond Williams, as an “anti-hope structure of feeling” (2024, p. 2).

While orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism differ greatly, both reflect and reproduce a despair about men that circulates widely across digital media, as the Sabrina Carpenter (2024) lyrics in the epigraph of this chapter indicate. Despair about men is not articulated solely in the name of “feminism” but finds purchase across a range of popular (con)texts. I have argued that manosphere figures and groups express the heteropessimism of popular misogyny. Yet there are also many “feminised” if not explicitly “feminist” cultural texts that express the prevailing heteropessimism of Western culture, “feminised” in the sense of being associated and targeted towards (mostly young) women. A non-exhaustive list of texts belonging to this category would include: social media accounts like the @hets_explain_yourselves Instagram page (see Ward, 2022); television shows like *Girls* (see Fuller & Driscoll, 2015) and *Fleabag* (see Holtzberg & Lehtonen, 2022); femcels and femcelcore (see Johanssen & Kay, 2024); the Female Dating Strategy (FDS) and dark feminine influencers (see Kay, 2024); and the song lyrics of (notably, white) pop stars including Carpenter, but also Taylor Swift, Lana Del Rey and Chappell Roan (see also Muir, 2022). Feminised expressions of heteropessimism may be particularly associated with straight women, but heteropessimism is also expressed by bi- and lesbian women (see Holtzberg & Lehtonen, 2022). While Carpenter (2024) expresses disappointment about the Lord forgetting her “gay awakenin’,” Roan (who identifies as a lesbian) has stated that “[Dating a boy is] just literally not fun … It's not fun. It's not hot. It's not interesting. It's boring” (as cited in Dobson,

2023). Consider also these lyrics from Roan's song "Femininomenon" (2023):

> So let's say it's working out
> You pretend to love his mother
> Lying to your friends about
> How he's such a goddamn good lover
> Stuck in the suburbs, you're folding his laundry
> Got what you wanted, so stop feeling sorry
> Crying at the nail salon
> I'm so sick of online love
> And I don't understand, why can't any man

Roan's lyrics here express what I have called, following Asa Seresin, heteropessimism, but could also be described in other ways. I could refer here to Lauren Berlant's formulation "the female complaint" (Berlant, 2008), to "womanly nihilism" (Marasco, 2020), to "the tragedy of heterosexuality" (Ward, 2022) or even, in a more extreme tone, "heteronihilism" (Johanssen & Kay, 2024). Jacob Johanssen and Jilly Boyce Kay employ the term "heteronihilism" to, in their words, "make sense of the widespread mood of 'giving up' that is increasingly entwined with, and expressed through, the radicalisation of negative heterosexual experience" (2024, p. 2). Jane Ward likewise argues that "straight culture" is "a culture arguably damaged by misogyny, even as it has been unwilling to address the structural causes of this damage" (2022, p. 4). In her book of the same name, she argues that "the tragedy of heterosexuality" is

> about men's control of women, but it is also about straight women's and men's shared romantic and erotic attachments to an unequal gender binary, or to the heteroerotic fantasy of binary, biologically determined, and naturally hierarchical gender oppositeness. This last feature, straight culture's eroticization of men's power over women, is often presented as a kind of benign playfulness—a joke shared among straight women about how husbands always get away without doing their fair share, let's say. But the heteroerotic appetite for situations in which straight men can display

> power over women also fuels sexual violence, infusing straight culture with endless eroticized representations of men hurting women and with romantic tales of the redemption of violent, aggressive, entitled, and self-obsessed straight men. (Ward, 2022, p. 14)

Building on this scholarship, which analyses how despair about heterosexuality operates in an array of cultural texts, especially those produced by and/or for women, my aim here is to articulate the heteropessimistic logics of two emerging modes of popular feminism. In heteropessimistic Western feminisms, men's power over women is not straightforwardly eroticised as Ward argues is the case in many sites of straight culture. Yet an attachment to men's power over women persists despite sometimes vehement claims to the contrary. Billy Holtzberg and Aura Lehtonen have noted that while heteropessimism might seem to offer a powerful critique of heterosexuality because it involves the display of negative affects, it is rather "the latest stage of a postfeminist sensibility" (2022, p. 1903). For Holtzberg and Lehtonen, this display of negative affects serves to offset rather than buttress feminist politics. Despair about men functions similarly within orthodox and dissident feminisms. Although both these emerging modes of popular feminism frame despair about men as necessary for the advance of their respective feminisms, even its feminist guise serves to reinforce rather than challenge the influence of popular misogyny.

The previous chapter demonstrated that negative, essentialist and despairing ideas about men within feminism are not a new phenomenon but were a feature of radical feminist positions throughout the late 1960s-1980s, particularly those sometimes categorised as "cultural feminist." It is thus relevant to this discussion of heteropessimism that in contemporary Western feminist (con)texts, radical feminism is also usually identified with cultural feminists, especially Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Radical feminism is also strongly associated with the figure of the "trans-exclusionary radical feminist" or "TERF"—a term, which, although most often used as a pejorative, has been reclaimed by some (see Harrington, 2023). Trans-inclusive feminists who want to defend the legacy of radical feminism are

dismayed by this association:

> Given the rich and varied histories of radical feminism and their other radical movements, it is all the more tragic that radical femininity is now seen, particularly online, as synonymous with the figure of the TERF: an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminist … It's strange to imagine that anything that excludes trans people is now read as radical feminist, when radicalism and feminism have underpinned liberation movements for decades. The way TERFs are represented in contemporary media, primarily by those not affiliated with or identified with radical feminism, reflects a more general lack of contextualization. (Fahs, 2024, p. 483)

While Breanne Fahs considers this state of affairs "tragic," not all feminists feel the need to salvage radical feminism's reputation. In a conversation between Sophie Lewis and Asa Seresin, for example, Lewis connects the ideas promulgated by cultural feminists in the 1970s and contemporary TERFs. In Lewis's retelling:

> It was a small minority of straight and lesbian radical feminists who, historically, promulgated and then doubled down on a trans-exclusionary account of sex-class's primacy (meaning: dyadic at-birth sexuation is a primary axis of human oppression relative to class, and also relative to racialization). (Lewis & Seresin, 2022, p. 467)

Lewis takes care not to tar all radical feminists from this period with the same brush, however, adding that "radical feminism is by no means represented by this minority" (Lewis & Seresin, 2022, p. 467). Alice Cappelle makes a similar assessment in her book *Collapse Feminism* (2023), although she connects cultural feminists not with TERFs, but with "divine femininity influencers" (p. 66). By virtue of their name if nothing else, divine femininity influencers are reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's 1984 lecture turned paper *Femmes Divines,* translated into English as "Divine Women" by Stephen Muecke in 1986 (see Kunz, 2023, p. 27). Summarising Irigaray's paper, Elsa Kunz suggests that

> Irigaray makes numerous bold claims about divine women: that God is necessary to

> posit gender; that divinity is necessary for subjectivity; that there is no woman God; that the lack of a God for women impedes women's ability to become a subject; that in order to do so women need to realize a God in the feminine gender; and that in order to achieve full subjecthood, women must "become divine," are among them. (2023, p. 27)

Cruder than Irigaray, the content-creators usually referred to as divine femininity influencers assert that men and women are "naturally" different. They share this position with TERFS, yet not all TERFs explicitly endorse the same association between norms of femininity and female biology. For this reason, according to Cappelle, divine femininity influencers are in general a more direct successor to cultural feminism than TERFS (2023, p. 66).

Contemporary feminists also draw directly from radical feminism regularly in discussions of sexual consent. Australian feminist Chanel Contos cites Andrea Dworkin over a hundred times in her book, *Consent Laid Bare* (2023) which is advertised by its publisher as "a battle cry from a generation no longer prepared to stay silent." Positioned by herself and others as something of a contemporary Dworkin, Contos has publicly stated that she thinks that "it's a shame that Dworkin fell out of fashion" (as cited in Nelson, 2023). Dovetailing with Contos's claim that contemporary feminism should return to ideas espoused by radical feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon, Srinivasan dedicates an entire chapter of her book to the "porn question" (2021, p. 40). For Srinivasan:

> It was my students who first led me to think about this question … They were riveted. Could it be that pornography doesn't merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said. Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to hear those protests? Yes, they said. Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalisation of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said. (2021, p. 40)

Perry also invokes Dworkin. Though she occasionally calls her "nuts," Perry maintains that Dworkin was right about porn. Suggesting that other contemporary feminists misconstrue Dworkin, Perry writes:

> If Dworkin, who died in 2005 at age 58, is remembered now, it is usually either as a figure of fun—the fat, angry dyke in dungarees—or as a historical curiosity. Following #MeToo, Dworkin became an unexpected figurehead for undiluted feminist rage, admired by some younger women for her uncompromising opposition to sexual violence. She acquired an edgy kind of status and, in 2019, a new anthology of her essays was published. But the harder side of Dworkin—the side that wanted not to critique porn but to actually ban it—remains deeply unfashionable. That Dworkin deserves our attention. (2024, para. 13)

"Radical feminism" has become increasingly visible in Western media circuits, a fact which indicates the heteropessimism of contemporary feminism as much as its desire for historical context (see Mackay, 2022). There is also a parallel here between the centrality of antagonism towards men in many radical feminist positions, particularly those held by cultural feminists, and the heteropessimistic ideas, images and conclusions about "man" that orthodox and dissident feminisms advance, a tendency furthered by their tendency to cite examples from the manosphere.

As I will now explore, the heteropessimism of orthodox feminism is apparent in the popular feminist trade books of Manne, Penny and Srinivasan. This work claims that men reproduce patriarchal gendered relations because of social conditioning, not some immutable essence. At the same time, I argue, Manne, Penny and (to a lesser extent) Srinivasan metonymically slide from "manosphere" to "man." In conjunction with the despair about men they express and their related scepticism towards extending men sympathy, this reproduces a vision of men as irredeemable agents of patriarchy. Despair in orthodox feminism is a form of feminist heteropessimism that manifests most acutely over questions about whether men can

contribute to realising a feminist social order. Ironically, this is taken to indicate a commitment to feminist politics. Heteropessimism, as Jennifer Hamilton et al. point out, "thwarts an examination of the other forces shaping intimate relations—misogyny and normative gender roles, economic stresses and the moral and emotional pressures of monogamy" (2022, para. 8). Orthodox feminism is heteropessimistic, counterproductively connecting expressions of despair about men with commitment to feminist politics. To demonstrate this, I begin with the feminist scholar who for me most paradigmatically expresses orthodox feminism, the philosopher, Kate Manne.

Kate Manne

In this section, I argue that Kate Manne's (con)texts reproduce a heteropessimistic order of things, partly because she draws on examples from the manosphere, where the patriarchal social conditions that she so trenchantly criticises, and wants so desperately to overcome, appear impossible to change. With *Down Girl* (2017) and the more recent *Entitled* (2020). A philosopher at Cornell at the time of writing, Manne is one of the most well-known and influential feminists working on the manosphere. I have suggested above that the heteropessimism of popular misogyny began to exert a greater influence on Western culture from 2018 onwards, but Manne actually came to prominence a year earlier than this, with *Down Girl's* publication in 2017. This was the year immediately following Trump's election, the year the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke, and the year #MeToo became popular, no doubt all partial explanations for why she has been dubbed "the philosopher of #MeToo" (see Malik, 2020). Endorsements of *Down Girl* repeatedly assert its timeliness. For Ruth Chang, as an example, *Down Girl* "couldn't come at a more auspicious time" (as cited in Manne, n.d.a). Carlos Lozada similarly calls it "excruciatingly well-timed" (as cited in Manne, n.d.a). Carrie Tirado Bramen contends that "at a time when high-profile sexual predators have been exposed, I can't imagine a more relevant read" (as cited in Manne, n.d.a). Regarding Manne herself, Antonella Gambotto-Burke claims that she has an "almost eerie flair for the zeitgeist" (as cited in Manne, n.d.a). Most laudatory is Regan Penaluna, who submits that:

> In the past year … so many brave women have come forward to share their experiences of sexual trauma and have actually been taken seriously. The moment is ripe for a reckoning, and Manne offers the language and theory I've found myself grasping for. (as cited in Manne, n.d.a)

While not all reviews of *Down Girl* are unequivocally positive, all maintain its connection to this particular moment. Moira Weigel argues, for example, that the book's political limitations are in part the result of her emphasis on current events:

> In the absence of history, Down Girl seems to hover between two time frames: (a) an eternity in which patriarchy has always been the way it is, and (b) a present tense defined by the major news stories of the past few years. There is no investigation of why masculinity and femininity came to be constituted as they have. As a result, there are few suggestions about how our dismal gender relations could ever change. (2017, para. 10)

Weigel is for this reason unmoved by the close attention Manne pays to Clinton. For her, #MeToo is substantially a response to the failures of a feminism "that said the answer was to seek professional status swore [sic] that if a few women could only get into power, the benefits would trickle down," a feminism which, according to Weigel (2017, para. 16), Hilary Clinton embodies. As well as being closely associated with popular feminist figures, Manne is frequently identified with feminist figures from the past. Connecting *Down Girl* to Betty Friedan's (1963) famous chapter "The Problem That Has No Name," for example, Afua Hirsch entitled her review "The Problem With a Name" (2018). More explicitly, Jennifer Taylor Skinner claims that "*Down Girl* is destined to become a feminist literary classic alongside the likes of *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*" (as cited in Manne, n.d.a). Amanda Marcotte goes a step further, calling Manne "the Simone de Beauvoir of the 21st century" (as cited in Manne, n.d.b).

This all makes Manne a good example for this thesis, serving to contextualise the

orthodox feminist idea that feminists should be sceptical of sympathy for men—particularly men involved in the manosphere in particular but also men more broadly. In both *Down Girl* (2017) and *Entitled* (2020), Manne uses the manosphere as a prompt for assessing contemporary gendered relations writ large. In the first chapter of *Down Girl*, she argues that although Elliot Rodger's mass shooting spree was a clear act of misogynist violence, outside of feminist circles there was reluctance to acknowledge this. In her analysis of the "Isla Vista Killings," for this reason, Manne focuses not on Rodger as an individual misogynist but on how the "popular" response to Rodger demonstrates just how deeply entrenched misogyny is in contemporary Western culture (p. 36). In light of this, she endeavours to reconceptualise misogyny as a property of social environments rather than of individuals.

Manne represents misogyny as the law enforcement wing of patriarchy in response to what she sees as the "naive conception" of misogyny as a characteristic of individual men harbouring feelings of hatred or hostility towards women. She draws from Sally Haslanger to distinguish her conception of misogyny as ameliorative, rather than conceptual or descriptive (Manne, 2017, p. 42). While conceptual analysis engages philosophical reflection to unveil the *a priori* underpinnings of ordinary or "folk" usage of terms, and descriptive analysis intends to capture all the objects in the world to which a term gets applied, ameliorative analysis aims to support the fruition of a particular goal or outcome (Manne, 2017, p. 42). To support feminist politics, she argues, misogyny should be understood not as a psychological property of individuals but as a property of social environments wherein girls and women face punishment when their behaviour fails to be "appropriate":

> Misogyny is primarily a property of social environments in which girls and women are prone to face hostility because of the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations—e.g., insofar as they are deemed guilty of violating patriarchal law and order. (Manne, 2017, p. 55)

This metaphor, naming misogyny as the law enforcement wing of patriarchy, also allows Manne to differentiate misogyny from the more implicit, diffuse and seemingly reasonable

wing of patriarchy—sexism. She writes that "sexism is taken to be the branch of patriarchal ideology that justifies and rationalises a patriarchal social order, while misogyny is the system that polices and enforces its governing norms and expectations. So sexism is scientific; misogyny is moralistic" (Manne, 2017, p. 78). For Manne, then, patriarchy fundamentally has two components: sexism is its ideological wing and misogyny is its law enforcement wing. Although she does not provide a detailed definition of patriarchy, she alludes to it as the background or social environment against which misogyny and sexism operate:

> Misogyny is primarily a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are women in a man's world (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to patriarchal standards (i.e., tenets of patriarchal ideology that have some purchase in this environment). (Manne, 2017, p. 34)

Manne thus advances a messy set of relations between misogyny, sexism and patriarchy. From one angle, the mutually reinforcing relationship between misogyny and sexism sustains patriarchy. Misogyny makes sexism "reasonable" while sexism encourages and emboldens misogynistic moralism. From another angle, misogyny and sexism result from an already existing, though not necessarily totalising, patriarchal social environment. Manne's avowedly liberal notion of "connection" as the basis for whether a social environment is patriarchal relates to her vision of misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy as entangled phenomena whose conceptual boundaries cannot be neatly disaggregated:

> The analysis I've proposed makes misogyny out to be an inherently *political* phenomenon. Specifically, it makes misogyny in a social environment metaphysically dependent on there being norms and expectations of a patriarchal nature. This does not mean that misogyny can only obtain within a fully functioning patriarchy. But it does mean that there must be some historical connection with one—with "connection" construed liberally enough to include *borrowing* from another culture, *incipient*

> norms and expectations, as well as direct inheritance. (2017, p. 67)

One obvious strength of this conception of misogyny is that it helps explain why women sometimes contribute to reproducing the very patriarchal social conditions that oppress them. Since misogyny involves an explicit and hostile disciplinary dimension, it is fully comprehensible that women might engage in preemptive self-discipline to avoid the consequences of transgressing patriarchal norms. According to Manne, though, the flipside of this situation is that women who refuse to acquiesce to patriarchal norms, women who threaten the prevailing gender order, often but not exclusively feminist women, are juxtaposed against "good" women as "bad" women who deserve punishment. Designating female politicians Julia Gillard and Hilary Clinton as high profile examples of "bad" women, Manne claims that though misogyny as punishment is meted out most readily and severely to "bad" women, and most often by men, no woman lives free from misogynistic discipline. Regardless of whether a woman is designated "good" or "bad," all women are embedded in patriarchal social environments. Regardless, even, of whether a woman actively engages in misogyny in an attempt to deflect it from herself, all women are subject to the effects of, and actively constituted by, misogyny.

Manne takes for granted feminist agreement about what constitutes patriarchal norms, and also what constitutes their transgression. Rather than theorise transgression directly, she argues for the existence of patterns in how men express entitlement to women and their "services." While Manne suggests that people have agency to the extent that their choices can implicate them in reproducing patriarchal social conditions, she is not hopeful about the prospects of resistance. Towards the end of *Down Girl*, she argues that patriarchal social environments construct men as human *beings* and women as human *givers*:

> We can distinguish between a (self-)recognized *human being*—e.g., white men who are otherwise privileged in most if not all major respects—versus a *human giver*, a woman who is held to owe many if not most of her distinctively human capacities to a suitable boy or man, ideally, and his children, as applicable … A giver is then obligated to offer

> love, sex, attention, affection, and admiration, as well as other forms of emotional, social, reproductive, and caregiving labor, in accordance with social norms that govern and structure the relevant roles and relations. (Manne, 2017, p. 301)

This explains why Manne is sceptical about any form of extending sympathy to men, which in her view can buttress the sexist idea that women are responsible for servicing men's needs at the expense of their own. Indeed, she describes "himpathy" as "the often overlooked mirror image of misogyny," demonstrating this by examining the treatment of Stanford University student Brock Turner during his highly publicised sexual assault trial (Manne, 2017, p. 197). Despite overwhelming evidence that he did, in fact, sexually assault Chanel Miller at a campus party, Turner received the meagre sentence of six months in county jail, of which he actually served three. Throughout the trial, Manne points out, Turner's potential was repeatedly emphasised, and grave concern expressed about how a longer sentence would cause him harm. Comparatively little attention was given to Miller's potential or to how her life had been impacted by the sexual assault. For Manne, a scenario like this only "makes sense" where "himpathy" abounds. In other words, only in a context where men's career prospects are systematically valued above women's bodily autonomy can a man receive more active sympathy than the woman he has sexually violated.

Manne's caution against extending sympathy to men only amplifies when she considers men involved in the manosphere. When analysing the particularly pernicious and toxic influence of incels, for example, her warnings become more pronounced. Manne points out that incels employ discourses of victimisation and vulnerability not to generate but foreclose the possibility of solidarity with women. What incels really desire, she suggests, is "an unjust hierarchy to locate themselves on" in order to "vindicate their preexisting feelings of inferiority and aggrieved entitlement" (Manne, 2020, p. 29). According to Manne, it is not only a waste of time expending energy trying to understand, or sympathise with, incels; it is politically noxious:

> When someone is in pain precisely because he has an overblown sense of entitlement

> to the soothing ministrations of others, which have not been forthcoming, stepping in to assuage his pain becomes an ethically fraught enterprise. Even expressing our sympathies runs the risk of feeding his false, dangerous sense that other people—especially girls and women—exist to pander to the incel's needs and to gratify his ego. So here, as elsewhere, we ought to resist the pressure to himpathize. (2020, p. 30)

Manne thus uses the manosphere to advance ideas about men and masculinity, arguing that sympathy for men can obscure their role in reproducing patriarchal gendered relations and thereby absolve them of the responsibility to work to overcome patriarchy. While she claims that himpathy is normal—as in, *normalised*—this makes it all the more insidious. It is patriarchy, she contends, that makes this appear the morally appropriate response. Under such patriarchal social conditions, Manne argues, women are oppressed to such a grave extent that even the mere implication that they have a right to exist for themselves rather than to serve others is deemed inappropriate. With this as her final observation, Manne closes *Down Girl* on a note of despair:

> What could possibly change any of this? Even *trying* is liable to make me seem nasty, abrasive, and pushy (dare I say shrilly) and gives rise to the sort of resistance that, in being aesthetic as well as moral, tends to be fatal. Or, if one does manage to sugar-coat it, it becomes self-defeating. So I give up. I wish I could offer a more hopeful message. (2017, p. 300)

This passage is striking. Having detailed the far-reaching influence of patriarchy, Manne despairs in light of her own insight that any attempt to resist patriarchal norms might be correctly interpreted as such. Manne frames her ameliorative conception of misogyny as superior to the naive conception because the latter does not support feminist politics. While I share Manne's critique of the naive conception, I find it difficult to see how the choice to end on an unambiguously despairing note is itself politically productive. In *Down Girl* (2017), Manne frames patriarchy as insurmountable in any substantive sense. Does Manne not thereby undercut the validity of her argument's claim to be ameliorative? If despair is what

results from her conception of misogyny, how can it serve the purpose for which it was formulated? How can an explicitly hopeless conclusion support feminist politics?

There is a jarring disconnect between Manne's meticulous description of misogyny and her despair about men. If misogyny is a property of social environments, as she argues it is, does human agency simply not extend as far as to be able to resist patriarchal power? Or, is it that people can technically resist patriarchy but that those with more power (in her view, men) are unlikely to be interested in feminism if not actively opposed to it? Manne's influential conception of misogyny serves to pathologise men arguably even more than the naive conception, which, despite saying nothing about power, at least allows that not all men are "bad," and that at least some men are "good." Thinking with Manne, by contrast, "the manosphere" becomes "man" becomes "bad." [14] The worst case scenario based on this conflation is that men are mere effects of patriarchy, with the best case being that patriarchy will prevail for as long as men remain unwilling to enact their agency in support of feminism—which by Manne's account looks like forever. Much like the socialist critique of cultural power that Hall warned inadvertently positions working people as passive, Manne evinces a despair about men by citing examples from the manosphere that reinforces the heteropessimism and influence of popular misogyny.

Laurie Penny

In this section, I argue that despite expressing more complex feelings of despair about men compared to Manne, Laurie Penny also produces a heteropessimistic account of the influence of popular misogyny, partly because examples they cite from the manosphere are so significant to their argument. Penny, like Manne, has published widely on contemporary gendered dynamics, although they are particularly interested in how the online sphere both impinges

[14] Again, my argument is not at all to deny that men outside of the manosphere can and do enact sexism and misogyny. It is rather to think through how the choice to use the manosphere to theorise about men is imbricated with the present conjuncture, which I am arguing is characterised by profound heteropessimism.

and affords opportunities for feminist politics. Described by the *Daily Telegraph* in 2012 as "without doubt the loudest and most controversial female voice on the radical left" (see Stryker, 2017), Penny strongly distinguishes their work from a feminism that fails to see that men are potential collaborators in the struggle against patriarchy. Penny writes:

> It's true that too many feminists point the finger at "men" in general—as if "men" were no more than a homogenous mass of beer-swilling, crotch-scratching sexists … If feminism is to remain useful, a more coherent and courageous approach is needed. Only through a radical reorganisation of men and women's economic participation at home, at work, in life and in love will we begin to address the damage that regressive gender roles continue to inflict on both sexes. If feminism has failed in its objectives, it has failed men too. If it is not to fail again, it must achieve them in collaboration with men—not in spite of them. (2010, para. 9)

Despite this call to collaborate with men, Penny's interest in and representation of the manosphere shares a lot with Manne's, the result being that they reproduce remarkably similar pictures of contemporary society. In *Sexual Revolution* (2022), Penny also uses the manosphere to argue that "modern fascism" is a problem inextricably connected to "modern masculinity," which only a "feminist fightback" can solve.

Despite tackling similar issues and taking a similar approach, Penny's *Sexual Revolution* was not as well-received as Manne's *Down Girl* (2017). Penny suggests that this is at least partly because they identify as genderqueer. As they put it, "in the UK, there have been surprisingly nasty attacks on this book from gender critical feminists—attacks that have got, honestly, nothing to do with the book itself. They have all been about the fact that I am genderqueer" (2022, para. 17). Penny is right that reviews of *Sexual Revolution* (2022) by gender critical feminists in the UK mention their gender identity in irrelevant contexts and present the book's flaws as evidence for why feminist politics should exclude transgender women. Rachel Cooke (2022), for example, makes reference to Penny's pronouns when likening *Sexual Revolution*

to a self-help manual. Cooke writes that "if the tone of the book is almost comically relentless—if Penny, whose pronouns are they/them, says something once, they say it 54 times—it's also oddly reminiscent of a superannuated self-help manual" (2022a, para. 3). Likewise, Julie Bindel, who at the time of writing has just published an article entitled "Twenty Years a Terf" (2024), argues that Penny's emphasis on contemporary events like #MeToo means they fail to grasp the significance of the problem of male violence:

> Penny also seems blissfully unaware that any feminist activism happened prior to the #MeToo movement … No amount of fudging and outright denial will alter the fact that the feminists currently labelled "TERFS" and "SWERFS" are those who have changed laws, raised public awareness and established domestic violence refuges, rape crisis centres and other women-only services that have proven essential in a world where male violence is endemic. (2022a, para 6)

Sarah Ditum's offering, entitled "Sexual Revolution by Laurie Penny review—feminism with the women cut out," similarly leverages Penny's supposed historical ignorance in order to deride trans-inclusive feminism:

> "Fascism" is nothing but a placeholder here for "things Laurie Penny thinks are bad" and the concept of "feminism" is similarly abused. The traditional understanding of it as a movement for women's rights is, alas, tainted by the fact that only very embarrassing and uncool people would use the word "woman" in its ordinary sense these days … So *Sexual Revolution* cycles through ungainly formulations such as "women and femmes", "women and queer people", and "people who can become pregnant." Roughly translated, these mean "women and anyone who wears make-up," "women and anyone who claims to be mildly kinky", and "the people formerly known as women." In what sense these groupings make a plausible political class is never explained, although it is unlikely that any explanation would improve things. (2022, para 5)

This situation resembles the call and response Banet-Weiser describes between popular feminism and popular misogyny, whereby popular feminism asserts that women have capacity ("can-do" things) and popular misogyny reacts, not by disagreeing, but by distorting popular feminist ideas for its own reactionary agenda (2018, p. 113). These reviews express a generic call and response between modes of popular feminism that vehemently disagree about the causes of gendered harms. While Penny locates the problem of men in "modern masculinity" and these gender critical feminists in male biology, both modes of popular feminism cohere around the notion that men's role in feminism is exclusively that of antagonistic.

Penny and Mannes' respective visions of men are also strikingly similar, with each bemoaning that much "popular" media responds to men involved in the manosphere by listening to their grievances, expressing concern for them, and even calling for greater understanding from the public. Like Manne's argument about "himpathy," Penny is sceptical about extending sympathy to these men, and to men generally, claiming this often serves to naturalise social hierarchies. Penny prefers instead to extend sympathy to, well, everyone else:

> When will it be someone else's turn for concern and understanding? When will the frustrated man-children and hysterical racists clamouring for someone to entertain their 'legitimate' concerns offer anyone else a solitary shred of the empathy and respect they demand on pain of violence? Right now, as the body count continues to grow, we are well past the limits of what empathy and understanding can achieve with young men who have gone down the rabbit hole of racist, sexist revenge fantasies. Zero tolerance is the only possible response. I wish empathy and understanding had been enough. But I've known enough women who have worn themselves to rags trying to empathise with men who continue to hurt and harass and abuse them. (2022a, p. 207)

Also like Manne, Penny connects the idea that misogynistic men deserve sympathy to another idea they find equally entrenched in contemporary Western popular culture—the idea that

men are entitled to women's emotional, romantic and sexual services. Again like Manne, Penny argues that this kind of gendered entitlement, despite taking more extreme form in the manosphere, is common among "ordinary" men (2022a, p. 209). They claim that "what I've seen on incel forums is merely the extreme iteration of a mindset shared by many apparently normal, non-terrorist men today" (Penny, 2022a, p. 209).

Despite sharing much with Manne, Penny diverges in their claim that extending sympathy to men is also bad for the majority of men on the basis that it reproduces male dominance. For Manne (as cited in Chang, 2019), "what matters is not deep down but right there on the surface," while Penny is more interested in *why* men reproduce patriarchal norms. Penny's argument that "to be raised male in late capitalism is, in so many cases, a process of psychological castration" (2022a, p. 112) is instead more reminiscent of bell hooks (2004), and their heteropessimistic despair is more conflicted. Penny writes:

> Modern masculinity is brittle and fragile. It reacts to any perceived threat by lashing out and shutting down. It is definitionally resistant not just to change, but even to the thought of change … I despair of it, sometimes, and despair is exhausting, and I won't settle for it. I still want to understand why men do what they do and how they can begin the work of change. Because right now too many men and boys seem to believe that change is impossible. (2022a, p. 214)

Thus distinguishing between men and patriarchy, Penny suggests that less the former and more the latter is responsible for male dominance. They do not endorse a feminist project of trying to construct "good" men because they do not think that more good men would ameliorate these patriarchal social conditions:

> So what does it mean to be a good man? The answer, the real answer, the one that more men need to be ready to hear, is that *it does not matter*. It does not matter, because the problem is not "bad men" … This sexual revolution is not about making men better. This sexual revolution imagines a world where a woman's life does not depend on all of the

men in it being "good." (Penny, 2022a, p. 223)

Notwithstanding Penny's more complex despair about men, their representation of the manosphere nevertheless reinforces heteropessimism and thereby supports the influence of popular misogyny. The fact that Manne and Penny both assume that sympathy is finite reproduces the notion that men and feminism are necessarily antagonistic. This is the case even though it is not, in fact, impossible to simultaneously extend sympathy to men and women and gender diverse people, if often for different reasons, at the same time. More provocatively, even if sympathy were finite, it is unlikely that choosing to extend sympathy to some men, some of the time, need always have the effect of reproducing patriarchal norms. Penny does acknowledge popular feminism too often speaks of "'men' in general" (2010, para. 9). What they do not do, however, is consider whether metonymically sliding from "manosphere" to "man" might hinder recognition of the plurality, complexity and ambivalence of men's relations to patriarchy and, for that matter, to feminism.

Amia Srinivasan

In this final section, I argue that Amia Srinivasan's "use" of the manosphere represents the most complex of these orthodox feminist accounts of men's relations to feminism. It is also the least heteropessimistic. In *The Right to Sex* (2021), Srinivasan too uses the event of Elliot Rodger as a prompt to advance ideas about men and masculinity; specifically, the politics of desire. Rather than focus on detailing how deeply entrenched misogyny is in Western culture, however, Srinivasan critically evaluates other feminist responses to Rodger:

> The most common feminist take was that Rodger was the embodiment of misogynistic entitlement: specifically, the embodiment of the violence that erupts when that entitlement is thwarted. This was surely correct, and worth saying, given that many mainstream commentators refused to see Rodger as a misogynist … Still, what struck me about this response was its apparent disinterest concerning Rodger's claims to

> having been sexually and romantically marginalized on the basis of his race, introversion, and lack of stereotypical masculinity … Racism and heteronormativity do extend into the sphere of romance and sex; indeed it is in this intimate sphere, protected by the logic of "personal preferences," that they sink some of their deepest roots. Did feminists not have anything to say about this? (2021, pp. 93-94)

As the above quote demonstrates, Srinivasan explicitly distances herself from the "common feminist take" and, in this respect, seems the most difficult to categorise as an orthodox feminist. Diverging from Manne and Penny, she allows for the fact that while power hierarchies complicate desire so too do desires complicate seemingly straightforward power hierarchies. She is likewise more seriously committed to intersectionality, as well as sceptical of any feminism that defines itself by what all women purportedly have in "common." Srinivasan describes "the broad methodological orientation" of *The Right to Sex* as the embrace of ambivalence (as cited in Cooke, 2021). Like Manne, she is a philosopher (in Srinivasan's case at Oxford University) who is associated with #MeToo, yet not simply as an advocate, as is the case for Manne, but rather for holding its composite feminist truisms up to critical scrutiny, including its most famous dictum "believe women." Initially a 2018 article for the *London Review of Books*, Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* was published in 2021 to critical acclaim, as well as some controversy. Dominique Sisley in *AnOther*, for example, calls it "one of the most controversial political releases of the year" (2021, para. 1). Rachel Cooke in *The Guardian* claims, in a similar vein, that Srinivasan occasionally embraces "what some may regard as the un-embraceable" (2021, para. 14). And Srinivasan herself acknowledges that her arguments are likely to "raise a couple of eyebrows" (as cited in Tsjeng, 2021, para. 3).

Controversial though her book may be, this has served to further her popularity. Zing Tsjeng's piece for *Vogue,* entitled "Philosopher Amia Srinivasan Will Radically Change the Way You See Feminism, The #MeToo Movement—And Sex," calls Srinivasan a "star" (2021). She has received similarly glowing features in several major Western cultural magazines, including *Dazed* (Dawson, 2021) and *The Paris Review* (Haas, 2021). She has also been

featured “in conversation” with famous American model and writer Emily Ratajkowski for *Interview* (Srinivasan, 2021). Although on one level, Srinivasan thus embraces mainstream media, she also criticises the tendency for feminism and feminists to become less radical as they become more mainstream or, in Hall’s terms, as they begin to occupy a more dominant cultural position. She expresses this concern in her interview for *AnOther*:

> Almost inevitably, when feminism enters the mainstream it is going to be deradicalised, and that’s true of any kind of radical social movement. The question is, how do you keep that radicalism alive? After a certain kind of feminism has been co-opted, how do you keep up the pressure? How do you say, no that’s not enough? (as cited Sisley, 2021, para. 11)

In *Guernica*, too, Srinivasan considers the difference between feminist power and powerful feminists:

> Everything that’s been happening within the #MeToo movement suggests that certain feminists have an awful lot of power. We have to have difficult and fraught conversations about what it means to wield that in a way that’s genuinely consistent with feminist principles. (as cited in Penaluna, 2021, para. 34)

Given her own clear interest in popular feminism, it is worth noting that Srinivasan has not addressed whether her own participation in mainstream media circuits has served—or not served—to lessen the radicality of her feminist politics. Nevertheless, the fact that Srinivasan takes “comfort” in ambivalence is part of why her representation of the manosphere involves much less essentialism about men (as cited in Tsjeng, 2021, para. 14). Feminist refusal to consider whether Rodger experienced sexual or romantic marginalisation, Srinivasan argues, is understandable; a result of the fact that he was a misogynistic mass murderer. In her view, it is also connected to the ascendancy of sex positivity within contemporary feminism. While the idea that whatever a person verbally consents to is necessarily permissible might seem innocuous, it forecloses reflecting on the forces that shape sexual desire. This so-called “sex

positive" vision of sexual relations, Srinivasan claims, would have us believe that acting on desire should only be curtailed by consent and is, in this regard, analogous to the free market, where "what matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand, but that [the sexual partners] have agreed to the transfer" (2021, p. 82). By circumscribing sex as a purely private matter, contemporary feminists can only, and problematically, respond to claims about sexual or romantic marginalisation— including but not limited to the kind made by Rodger—with quietism, if not outright dismissal. Take this 2018 tweet from Manne:

> Could we please stop discussing whether or not there is a right to sex? Of course there is not. There is a right not to be raped. Enough hand-wringing. The end … The observation that the extent to which one gets what one wants out of life, in any domain, is often largely a matter of luck and happenstance and privilege and characteristics you don't have control over is about as banal as it gets. (as cited in Srinivasan, 2021, p. 94)

Srinivasan disagrees. In her view, it is far from banal to observe that desire, everyone's desire, is always and everywhere informed by the political dynamics of their social context. Sex positivity makes contemporary feminism deficient, according to Srinivasan, because it makes it difficult to interrogate the conditions that shape desire. This is to say, sex positivity distracts from how the perverse logics that permeate life such as racism, classism, ableism and heteronormativity influence desire. It is not, Srinivasan reminds us, only men involved in the manosphere like Rodger who claim to be side-lined by patriarchal standards of desirability, so too do members of marginalised social groups—for example, black, fat, trans and/or disabled people—to whom contemporary feminists routinely and rightly extend sympathy. According to Srinivasan, contemporary feminists are tacitly aware, though do not often acknowledge, that having less sexual or romantic success can never be chalked up merely to individual sexual preference but is always connected to cultural norms. Though she makes clear that there is no right to sex insofar as a "right" means something one is entitled to receive from another, she argues that this is an insufficient way for feminists to respond to the fact that actually existing desire tends to mirror general patterns of social "domination and exclusion" (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 90). To move closer to a world of liberated sexual relations, Srinivasan claims, feminists

must attend to, rather than eschew, the complex dynamics that underpin desire. And this, she thinks, requires considering whether there is anything legitimate in claims made by men involved in the manosphere like Rodger. For her part:

> It's true that the kind of women Rodger wanted to have sex with—hot sorority blondes—don't as a rule date men like Rodger, even the non-creepy, non-homicidal ones, at least not until they make their fortune in Silicon Valley. It's also true that this has something to do with the rigid gender norms enforced by patriarchy: alpha females want alpha males. And it's true that Rodger's desires—his erotic fixation on the 'spoiled, stuck-up, blonde slut'—are themselves a function of patriarchy, as is the way the 'hot blonde slut' becomes a metonym for all women. (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 76)

Srinivasan also considers the importance of intersectionality to contemporary feminism critically. Although she herself is a proponent of intersectionality, she argues that it "is often reduced, in common understanding, to a due consideration of the various axes of oppression and privilege: race, class, sexuality, disability, and so on" (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 17). This reduction obscures what is, in her view, the central insight of intersectionality—namely, "that any liberation movement … that focuses only on what all members of the relevant group have in common is a movement that will best serve those members of the group who are least oppressed" (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 17). Srinivasan thinks it is positive that feminism now considers how patriarchal oppression is inflected, for example, by dynamics of race and class. She also thinks it is positive that, related to this, feminists are now generally more reluctant to advance universal prescriptions about what is and is not liberation, and what is and is not resistance. Yet she is concerned that the common reductive understanding of intersectionality inadvertently buttresses sex positivity and, by extension, contemporary feminism's quietism regarding how to liberate sex:

> The important thing now is to take women at their word. If a woman says she enjoys working in porn, or being paid to have sex with men, or engaging in rape fantasies, or

> wearing stilettos—and even that she doesn't just enjoy these things but finds them emancipatory, part of her feminist praxis—then we are required, as feminists, to trust her. (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 82)

Srinivasan claims that these two core tenets of contemporary feminism—sex positivity and intersectionality—in fact produce a tension. On the one hand, contemporary feminism insists that the individual is the sole arbiter of what does and does not provoke their desire. On the other hand, it emphasises that intertwined and overlapping systems of oppression produce marginalised subjects who resultantly face discrimination in all areas of their lives, including their sex lives. Yet contemporary feminism, Srinivasan claims, is often unwilling or only selectively willing to address the politics of desire.

This tension prompts Srinivasan to single out the real question: "How do we engage in a political critique of sex without slipping into the misogynistic logic of sexual entitlement ("the right to sex") or into a moral authoritarianism that disciplines rather than emancipates?" (2021, p. 102). She understands that there are risks to making the politics of desire more explicit, most of all given its potential to reinforce an already prominent masculinist discourse of sexual entitlement. While Srinivasan also evinces heteropessimism, it is in a more subtle way than Manne or Penny. *The Right to Sex* argues that desire is largely shaped by unjust social forces, and that these unjust social forces also negatively affect men. Yet it is for her conceivably better to ignore rather than embrace this truth about desire because men are likely to use it to extend their dominance over women. Despite her nuanced account, then, it is not only men involved in the manosphere that Srinivasan does not trust, but men in general. Srinivasan also expresses concern about how "re-politicising" desire could be used to extend the scope of the idea that the "unjustly sexually marginalised or excluded have a … right to sex, a right that is being violated by those who refuse to have sex with them" (2021, p. 86). Although she does not consider the simple refutation of the right to sex a sufficient feminist response, Srinivasan remains thoroughly disturbed by, and avowedly critical of, the way that incels claim a parallel between economic poverty and so-called sexual poverty:

> On the now defunct Reddit group, a post titled 'It should be legal for incels to rape women' explained that 'No starving man should have to go to prison for stealing food, and no sexually starved man should have to go to prison for raping a woman.' It is a sickening false equivalence, which reveals the violent misconception at the heart of patriarchy. Some men are excluded from the sexual sphere for politically suspect reasons—including, perhaps, some of the men driven to vent their despair on anonymous forums—but the moment their unhappiness is transmuted into a rage at the women 'denying' them sex, rather than at the systems that shape desire (their own and others'), they have crossed a line into something morally ugly and confused. (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 86)

Despite her heteropessimism, Srinivasan's willingness to sit with complexity and engage with the non-ideal allows her to take men's claims of romantic and sexual marginalisation seriously—even incels, who outright reject feminism—without becoming a misogynist apologist. In a chapter entitled "The Conspiracy Against Men" (2021), for example, she argues that men are often conscious agents of patriarchy and, as a result, she withdraws somewhat from extending them sympathy. Discussions about #MeToo, Srinivasan claims, often suggest that recent changes in cultural norms surrounding sex and relationships have made men confused about how to relate to women. She summarises this suggestion as follows:

> Patriarchy has lied to men about what is and is not okay, in sex and in gender relations as a whole. Men are now being caught out and unfairly punished for their innocent mistakes, as women enforce a new set of rules. Perhaps these rules are the correct ones; and, doubtless, the old ones caused a lot of harm. But how were men to have known better? In their minds they weren't guilty, so don't they too have grounds for acquittal? (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 21)

Srinivasan thinks this characterisation is too convenient. While she agrees that men have largely determined the rules of the gender order, she points out that there have always

been women who have contested male dominance, both publicly and privately. Men should not be excused of sexual misconduct, including and up to the most extreme forms of sexual violence, on the grounds that they could not have known better. To do so would be, according to Srinivasan, too sympathetic to men and not sympathetic enough to women. For her, it is rather the case that men continue to choose to enact sexual violence against women because, frankly, they can:

> Those who insist that men aren't in a position to know better are in denial of what men have seen and heard. Men have chosen not to listen because it has suited them not to do so, because the norms of masculinity dictate that their pleasure takes priority, because all around them other men have been doing the same. (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 21)

Srinivasan implies here that patriarchy exerts less profound influence over men, rather than a different kind of influence. She thereby essentialises a connection between men's agency and patriarchy. This at least risks reproducing "man" as dominant, active and perpetrator, and "woman" as subordinate, passive and victim. It also risks turning men yet again into a source of despair. It is in this recourse to heteropessimism, if less assertively, that similarities and connections between this argument and Manne and Penny become important. As I have argued elsewhere:

> Despite its subtlety, Srinivasan's approach rests on an assumption that men desire to accomplish a patriarchal version of manhood. Granted, a lot of men do desire to conform to the normative masculine ideals of their context, including those pertaining to sexual desire. Yet it is also true that many men reject sexually violent patriarchal masculinity and contest masculine dominance in their sexual lives, or else embrace it to an uneven extent—only sometimes, in some sexual dynamics but not in others. Patriarchy's influence on men is more complicated than Srinivasan represents it to be, I would suggest, and men's entanglement with patriarchy is not only about success or

> failure at expressing a consistent, authentic desire for sexually violent patriarchal masculinity. Rather, as is the case with women, men's entanglements with patriarchy are complex, ambivalent and, above all, plural. (Laughren, 2025, pp. 9-10)

Citing examples from the manosphere throughout, Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* (2021) finally reproduces a fairly standard picture of men as more or less successful patriarchal agents. She certainly deviates significantly from Manne, who might be taken as the paradigmatic expression of orthodox feminism. Where Manne rejects the idea that sympathy could inform a feminist response to men, Srinivasan argues that men involved in the manosphere also suffer as a result of patriarchy, though in an importantly different sense to more visibly marginalised social groups. Srinivasan also insists that the manosphere cannot be adequately understood only with reference to misogyny. Her commitment to ambivalence allows her to figure men as both victim and perpetrator of patriarchy rather than exclusively as perpetrator as is the case in Manne's work. Nevertheless, Srinivasan expresses heteropessimism in similar terms to Manne and Penny. After making the compelling case that contemporary feminism needs to confront rather than eschew the complexity of the social forces shaping desire, Srinivasan herself backtracks somewhat from doing so because she does not trust men. While she represents the most complex orthodox feminist account of men's relations to feminism, then, Srinivasan's "use" of the manosphere involves profound doubt about whether men can contribute to realising a feminist social order.

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn out the importance of the manosphere to what I call the "orthodox" mode of popular feminism and stressed the heteropessimistic logic orthodox feminism shares with popular misogyny. Deploying Hall's account of "popular culture" as a site of contestation—a site where conjuncturally important tensions can be seen in action—I have demonstrated how the latest battles between popular feminism and popular misogyny in Western culture have given rise to this heteropessimism. Having proposed that popular feminist trade books are one site on which this cultural shift is playing out, I suggest that the

orthodox feminist mode of this genre tends to extract insights about "man" as general social category by citing examples from the manosphere. This orthodox popular feminism, which I've exemplified in the work of Manne, Penny and Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex*, is not a single unified feminist position. I have stressed differences between them. What they share, however, and share with other writers and content creators around them, is as follows: orthodox popular feminism invokes the concept of "patriarchy" to explain why the credibility of women's speech is undermined in Western culture, both on- and offline; it articulates a commitment to intersectional feminism and is trans-inclusive, acknowledging diversity among women and dissenting from any essentialisation of women; it criticises men's entitlement to, and objectification of, women while claiming that men can technically act to dismantle patriarchy and yet expresses despair about the likelihood of them actually doing so and is thus also sceptical about the political effects of extending sympathy to men. Despite the fact that these positions articulate gendered antagonisms in fairly standard progressive terms, I have argued that contemporary orthodox popular feminism thus evinces a politically limiting despair about men that reinforces the influence of popular misogyny. Before discussing the limitations of despair further in chapter five, I will turn in the next chapter to another mode of contemporary popular feminism that takes a very different line with regard to men while also reaching largely heteropessimistic conclusions.

Chapter Four:

Dissident feminism

> I went out with this boy once, yeah?
> And I met all his family
> Went to some, like, family barbecue
> And in the end, "Oh no, you're not my girl
> You know, we're just, we're just like
> Hanging out, aren't we?"
>
> — FKA twigs, "oh my love"

Introduction

This fourth chapter argues that dissident feminism, like orthodox feminism, evinces a politically limiting despair about men but that unlike orthodox feminism, its assessment of contemporary gendered relations repeats many ideas similar to those that circulate in the manosphere. To make this case, I begin by justifying my choice to describe Nina Power, Louise Perry and Mary Harrington as both "dissident" and "feminist." I then locate their dissident feminism as the feminist "part" of what Alan Finlayson calls "reactionary digital politics," a network whose organising claim is that inequality is "a natural phenomenon, scientifically verified, and the necessary basis of civil order, essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence" (2021, p. 172). The natural inequality that interests dissident feminists is presumed by them to be intrinsic to the differences between men and women. Similarly to men involved in the manosphere, these dissident feminists claim that the "reality" of sexual difference has been obscured by "liberal" and "progressive" feminists to the detriment of individual men and women, the social, cultural and psychological importance of the nuclear family, and, finally, Western civilisation at large. The rest of this chapter will then critically evaluate dissident feminism through analysis of Nina Power's *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Louise Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and

Mary Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* (2023a). My argument here is that dissident feminism is a mode of popular feminism that at first glance appears to align with feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism (see Kay, 2024; Laughren, 2024). On closer consideration, however, like Sarah Banet-Weiser's paradigmatic case of popular feminism, dissident feminism not only fails to "challenge deep structures of inequities," but also actively supports them (Banet-Weiser, et al., 2020, p. 13). A crucial point for this departure is that, unlike the orthodox feminism discussed in the previous chapter, dissident feminism identifies "sex-realism" as the only solution to the gendered antagonisms it claims are caused by "liberals." These dissident feminists reproduce bio-essentialist ideas that are fundamental to the heteropessimism of the manosphere.

Why "dissident"? Why "feminism"?

In this section, I justify my choice to describe Nina Power, Louise Perry and Mary Harrington as both "dissident" and "feminist." Since "dissident" refers to "a person who publicly disagrees with and criticises their government," it might be tempting to respond with the rejoinder that there is nothing dissident about these feminists—nor for that matter anything particularly feminist (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.b) I am choosing to call Power, Perry and Harrington "dissident" (rather than other possibilities like "heterodox," "enemy," "anti-liberal" or "reactionary") to emphasise the fact that they diverge from the orthodox approach to men that dominates Western popular feminism, which overwhelmingly articulates gendered antagonisms in both progressive and intersectional terms. Although heterodox may also seem appropriate for this end, I am choosing dissident in order to evoke the polemical mode in which these feminists write. The fact that I label these feminists as "dissident" does not mean that Power, Perry and Harrington express a range of straightforwardly less dominant cultural positions than orthodox feminism. As a mode of popular feminism dissident feminism aligns with institutional formations in which misogyny, always entangled with transphobia and racism, is an increasingly central organising principle. The heteropessimistic arguments that each of these dissident feminists make—for example, about sexual difference and male violence—overlap in many respects with ideas that circulate in the manosphere. Men involved

in the manosphere articulate despair about the current state of Western gendered relations on the basis that men are victims of feminists, in particular, but also of women generally. The dissident feminist mode of heteropessimism does not reproduce this view. What these dissident feminists do that is related, however, is blame "liberal" and "progressive" feminists for loosening "sex roles" in ways that (they claim) have led to an overly permissive Western sexual culture.

Dissident feminism's unironic attachment to a particular image of pre-modern heterosexuality is also an essential context for understanding its heteropessimism. Although modernity will not be the explicit focus of my discussion in this chapter, and still less this thesis, it is important to note its fraught status for Power, Perry and Harrington. These dissident feminists are not only opposed to "liberals." They also more broadly criticise modernity, despite also all drawing on it for their own values and positions. Each of them condemns what they claim modernity has done to social order and community, particularly as pertains to "sex roles." As we will see, they all make some version of the argument that, by exhorting and idealising "independence," modernity and especially feminism has failed to properly value traditionally feminine nurturing roles. Harrington articulates this most explicitly as a contest within feminism between "team care" (her team) and "team freedom" (2023, pp. 15-20). By making these kinds of arguments, dissident feminism is tapping into a popular mode with a long history (see Driscoll, 2010, pp. 140-162). This mode resonates with writers as diverse as: Carl Jung (1968), for his elevation to a timeless order of strongly gendered archetypes; Martin Heidegger (1977), for his critique of modernity's claims to have made folk traditions and knowledges redundant in the progress of modern science; and, most pressingly for this thesis, Robert Bly's assertions about the restorative power of "primitive" gender roles for modern men (1990). It also overlaps with certain voices in the manosphere such as Jordan Peterson, who regularly invokes ideas about how modern society makes it difficult for us to perceive, let alone live in harmony with, eternal "male" and "female" archetypes.

Similarly to many manosphere voices, dissident feminists express concern about the

West being under threat for other reasons besides liberal feminists, including because of immigrants, Muslims and "a powerful new Marxism" (see Kay, 2024, pp. 2, 5). They tend to make these claims in "feminised" terms. Consider how Perry, for example, evokes an image of the home to criticise the UK's immigration policy in this tweet (2023):

> In the UK we have a self-defeating hybrid immigration model:
> Treat the country as a home when it comes to welfare and healthcare (= look after our family members)
> But treat it like a shop when it comes to border control (="Britain is open for business")
> Pick one!

The fact that this popular dissident feminism incorporates right-wing or otherwise reactionary ideas is yet another indication of the increasing influence that misogyny currently exerts over the terrain of Western popular culture. While dissident feminist ideas are taken up, circulated, celebrated and reproduced, this more often happens outside of feminist media circuits than within, where they continue to occupy somewhat of a marginal position. Power, Perry and Harrington are "dissident" feminists, then, because they represent a departure from an orthodoxy that remains internal to feminism.

A further reason for calling Power, Perry and Harrington "dissident" feminists is because they do not straightforwardly align with the pre-existing dominant schisms within feminism. All attend more closely to questions of men and masculinity than other trans-exclusionary feminists who have published work during the same period—for example, Julie Bindel's *Feminism for Women* (2021), Helen Joyce's *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (2021), Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls* (2021) and Holly Lawford-Smith's *Gender-Critical Feminism* (2022). Also, however, because Power, Perry and Harrington cite examples from the manosphere to advance ideas about "man" as a general social category, and connect their respective defences of sexual dimorphism to a defence of men via some version of the claim that, since men and women are naturally different, feminists need to "let men be" (Harrington,

2023a). In her review of Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, Bindel alludes to heteropessimism as a core point of difference between dissident feminism and other trans-exclusionary feminisms:

> There is much to applaud in Perry's book, which is why I gave it a glowing cover endorsement. It is well-written, rigorously researched, and it is clear that Perry has a genuine commitment to ending male violence. I share that commitment, but here's where we differ: I would never recommend that women invest in a hypothetical chastity belt and accept as inevitable that men will rape and pillage unless we contain them. (2022b, para. 8)

It is thus their vision of men that primarily differentiates what I am terming dissident feminism from orthodox feminism, and just as clearly differentiates them from other trans-exclusionary feminisms. This dissident feminism differs from the orthodox vision of men within popular feminism, as well as from an orthodoxy within trans-exclusionary feminism over how much attention, and what kind of attention, to pay to men.

I also categorise Power, Perry and Harrington as "feminists"—because they identify as such, and because they are committed to prioritising women's rights and interests. They have also all been exposed to feminist theorising in their academic lives. Power is an independent scholar/philosopher; Perry is a former student of gender studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS); and Harrington is a former student of English at Oxford University. Though excluding them from the category of feminists might be tempting based on equation of feminism with "the left" or progressive social agendas, this would obscure the myriad political projects to which the signifier "feminism" historically and presently attaches. Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur make this point well:

> Trans-exclusionary feminisms, gender critical feminisms, and all other problematic—if we dare use such an innocuous term, which these politics absolutely do not deserve—

> feminisms are, in fact, iterations of feminism. That the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 identified a set of priorities for women that were almost entirely unresponsive to the condition of Black and Native women does not mean it was not a feminist effort. White supremacist feminisms—think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and other self-avowed feminists who advocated for racial eugenics, among other ideas—are feminisms. Imperialist Feminisms—think of feminist global interventionism, histories of "white women saving brown women from brown men," as Lila Abu-Lughod (1998:14), riffing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, once put it—are feminisms. To suggest that trans-exclusionary or gender-critical feminisms are somehow the first movement to call themselves feminist while working against the ends of gender liberation but are not feminist movements flies in the face of the very real and very complicated histories of feminism across the globe. (2022, p. 321)

Bluntly, something being explicitly feminist does not ensure its status as "an incontrovertible political good" (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022, p. 320). As I have argued throughout this thesis, the meaning of "feminism" is not static but rather contextual and, also continually, contested on the terrain of popular culture through which popular feminisms emerge as such. [15] The fact that Power, Perry and Harrington all identify as feminists, though seemingly banal on one level, can thus be interpreted as an act of feminist contestation. Harrington, for example, seeks to disentangle feminism from progress when she states that "I've lost my faith in progress" and then that "I'm still a feminist, in the sense that I care about women's interests and think these are often sidelined" (2023a, p. 13). On the podcast *Free Speech Union*, Power likewise distinguishes "liberal" feminism from "genuine" feminism, doing so on the basis of their respective, supposedly divergent, treatments of men:

> We have a very stereotypical image of feminists as being man haters and so on and actually perversely some people who call themselves liberal feminists today would

[15] The meaning of "feminism" is of course also contested in and on other related terrains such as public spheres, homes, relationships and selves.

> probably fall into that category, but I think genuine feminists are not, uh, don't hate men at all. I think, feminists are interested in how external pressures shape how we feel we ought to behave and how we should be working collectively to erode or get rid of these expectations so that everybody can live together in a more peaceable and harmonious way. (Whitmore, 2022, 0:1:55)

And in a piece for *New Statesman*, Perry also criticises liberal feminism, suggesting that Harrington's reactionary feminism might be a viable feminist alternative:

> I think there is an alternative school of feminism brewing, one that has emerged out of the failed experiment of sexual liberation, and that takes seriously the hard limits imposed by sexual difference. Interviewers keep asking me what this movement is called, and I don't know what to tell them. "Post-liberal feminism," perhaps? Or "reactionary feminism," as my friend Mary Harrington (jokingly) calls it? I'm not sure. What I do know is that it can't come too soon. (2022b, para. 13)

This quotation from Perry leads to another important point that needs to be made before a closer evaluation of these writers' dissident feminist (con)texts. As with the orthodox feminists of the previous chapter, Power, Perry and Harrington quite simply do not always agree. No more than orthodox feminists, dissident feminists do not express one uniform position but rather produce and circulate a constellation of overlapping ideas and concerns. As Perry demonstrates in this citation of Harrington, however, dissident feminists tend to cite each other. This is less broadly true of the orthodox feminists, although in fact Perry also cites Manne very frequently. The self-authorising practices of such a niche community of citation are particularly pronounced—and important—for dissident feminism. The fact that these dissident feminist ideas remain fairly marginal within feminism in terms of activist groups, scholarship, or public debate makes lending each other legitimacy by boosting each other's profiles all the more important.[16] There is significant overlap between the ideas that Power,

[16] Much feminist attention has been given to the politics of citational practices (see Haraway, 1988).

Perry and Harrington articulate in the name of feminism, and this alone warrants categorising them together. As contributors and participants in broader networks that span genres including books, podcasts, YouTube channels, online journals, blogs and tweets, however, dissident feminism is an emerging mode of popular feminism that articulates many of the ideas found in the manosphere.

There are many points of resonance and divergence between the manosphere, the orthodox mode of popular feminism and the dissident mode. All three of these loose networks of positions heteropessimistically agree that sex and/or gender issues are crucial to the world and the viability of life. While men involved in the manosphere see men as victims of the reigning gender order, the two feminist modes agree both that women are specifically harmed, and that this harm requires feminist intervention. The orthodox mode I have exemplified with work by Manne, Penny and Srinivasan suggests that the way to address this is with a diverse and progress oriented future. These dissident feminists reject this and assert that the wide influence of progressive feminism is in fact part of the problem. In this way, dissident feminists circle back to align more with manosphere voices than with orthodox feminism. What Power, Perry and Harrington share with Manne, Penny and Srinivasan is that they are all media-savvy feminists who use the manosphere to make broad, heteropessimistic, claims about men. Nevertheless, dissident feminists occupy a very different position in the current conjuncture. Power, Perry and Harrington are associated with different political and media networks, have different audiences and employ different genres.

The feminist "part" of reactionary digital politics

In this section, I locate dissident feminism as the feminist "part" of a broader "reactionary digital politics" and identify Power, Perry and Harrington as "ideological entrepreneurs" (Finlayson, 2021). Again, I take the term "reactionary digital politics" from Alan Finlayson (2021; 2022), who describes it as a broad coalition encompassing the conservative far right, but also certain kinds of neoliberal and libertarian politics. Despite being complex, Finlayson suggests that reactionary digital politics aims at getting people to react *against* something

(2021, p. 172). Proponents of reactionary digital politics are not straightforwardly conservative in the sense that their focus is not simply on *limiting* progress but rather on posing a radical challenge to progress and other liberal enlightenment ideas, especially equality. Another feature of reactionary digital politics, as Finlayson points out, is that it is expressed online more so than in legacy media (2021, p. 172). I am proposing that Power, Perry and Harrington, and the dissident feminism they together express, are (at least part of) the feminist "part" of reactionary digital politics. Like other proponents of reactionary digital politics, including men involved in the manosphere, none of these dissident feminists advance consistently conservative or far right ideas but rather articulate a range of ideas, some of which are socially conservative, and others which align more with libertarian or otherwise reactionary views. As my ensuing analysis will show, each of these "ideological entrepreneurs" strives to entice their readers into reacting *against* "liberal" or "progressive" feminists, premised on the idea of natural inequality between the sexes. They do this partly by citing examples from the manosphere.

Dissident feminists make claims under the banner of feminism that circulate more often in right-wing networks than outside them, and this includes circulating within the manosphere. Like Jilly Boyce Kay, I am interested in the tensions that this "mutation" of popular feminisms expresses (2024, p. 2). What she calls reactionary feminism and what I am calling dissident feminism involves both a rejection of "girlboss" and other popular or neoliberal feminisms, but also "a rejection of social justice, a deep and transphobic bioessentialism, and hostility to liberationist feminism" (Kay, 2024, p. 2). Also citing Finlayson, Kay groups a variety of cultural "content" into the category of reactionary feminism, including "post-liberal" feminists (Perry and Harrington but not Power) and the "femosphere," especially the "Female Dating Strategy" and "dark feminine" dating influencers who are "sometimes framed as 'Andrew Tate for girls'" (2024, p. 2). As Kay points out, the femosphere is made up of "online, female-centric communities which mirror those of the manosphere" (2024, p. 1). The Female Dating Strategy (FDS) and dark feminine influencers claim to empower women by teaching them how to avoid being taken advantage of by men. However,

such femosphere groups are not open to the possibility of what Kay calls "liberationist feminism" because of their commitment to heteropessimistic/nihilistic discourses about "'brutal truths,' 'material conditions,' and women as a 'sex class'" (2024, pp. 1, 2).

Alongside this category of feminised, right-wing critique of neoliberalism, dissident feminism also in some respects overlaps with the "trad-wife" phenomenon. The "trad-wife," as I have argued elsewhere, is "a new expression of a patriarchal desire to make women entirely financially dependent on, and therefore subservient to, men—albeit under the guise of emancipation" (Laughren, 2024, para. 6). The dissident feminists I discuss here see much of value in putatively traditional heterosexual nuclear family units, which is why they sometimes engage in dialogue with manosphere figures like Peterson who are not feminists. However, dissident feminism differs from tradwifery because they make their claims explicitly in the name of feminism and do not espouse women's subservience or even dependence on men. The relationship that "tradfluencers" have to feminism is more tenuous, and sometimes even actively hostile (see Sykes & Hopner, 2024). What dissident feminism shares with the "trad-wife" is the suggestion that women often find more satisfaction by embracing the roles of wife and mother than they do by vainly struggling against their "nature" in seeking purpose through competition with men in the public sphere. Sarah Brouillette and Astrid Lorange's summary of tradwifery also applies to dissident feminism:

> Tradwifery draws a distinction between a world gone wrong—a world in which gender equality has led to the destruction of sexual difference; where women have been forced out of the home and into the workforce, and in doing so, weakened the bonds and

health of the family; and where whiteness, property rights, and private wealth are targets of state—and media-led conspiracies—and an aspirational world in which women have *returned home*. (2024, emphasis in original, para. 8)

As well as reproducing ideas that circulate across feminised, right-wing and anti-neoliberal (con)texts, dissident feminists often participate in broader right-wing networks of cultural production. They appear on and contribute to key right-wing podcasts associated with the manosphere (including Jordan Peterson's, his wife Tammy's, and his daughter Mikhalia's), and on related YouTube channels and online magazines with names like *Subversive* (Kaschuta, 2021) and *TRIGGERnometry,* the latter of which describes itself as "a free speech YouTube show and podcast" that believes in "open, fact-based discussion of important and controversial issues" (2022). These dissident feminists also cite and collaborate with each other. For example, Power and Harrington have both been guests on Perry's podcast *Mother, Maiden, Matriarch*, "a podcast about sexual politics" (2023–present). Perry and Harrington have both written for *Compact*, an online magazine of which Power was until recently senior editor, which proclaims on its "About" page that "though we have definite opinions, we proudly publish writers with whom we disagree" (n.d.). Power and Perry have also both contributed to *UnHerd*, a media organisation with an online magazine of which Harrington is a contributing editor. It declares on its YouTube channel that:

> UnHerd aims to do two things: to push back against the herd mentality with new and bold thinking, and to provide a platform for otherwise unheard ideas, people and places. We think this approach is more needed than ever. Societies across the West are divided and stuck, and the established media is struggling to make sense of what's happening. (n.d.)

As the names and self-descriptions of these sites of cultural production allude, proponents of reactionary digital politics tend to position themselves against "cancel culture"—despite or perhaps because of the vagueness of the term (see Mishan, 2020). Within these circuits of free speech politics, a rejection of cancel culture generally involves a figuring of a "new class"

as a "common enemy" (Finlayson, 2021, p. 177). Although the concept has a long and varied history, the proponents of contemporary reactionary digital politics use "new class" to refer to institutions and professions they associate with liberalism, especially universities (see Finlayson, 2021, pp. 174-177). As Finlayson observes:

> A range of ideological currents—conservatism, nationalism, ethnonationalism, libertarianism—share a critique of the liberal state which gives to it a cultural and intellectual rather than economic class character. That critique emphasises the linguistic and discursive power of 'new class' intellectuals, exercised through institutions of culture, communication and legal regulation, oppressing or victimising those with contrary cultural, political and ethical orientations. (2021, p. 177)

Power, Perry and Harrington are part of this political sphere, positioning themselves against "cancel culture," which Power has explicitly associated with "the left" (Bown & Rosenstock, 2022, 0:13:56). Appearing on *Sublation,* a podcast which calls itself "a left publisher that critiques the left in order to transform it," Power thanks her hosts, claiming that:

> I think, you know, you're probably about the only leftist people who are ever going to ask me to speak about this book—and this goes back a few years. It's like, I said repeatedly to people, let's talk, right, if you're upset with me because of something I've said, let's talk about it, and they won't, they absolutely refuse … They hint darkly that I must be secretly harbouring some sort of, you know, fascist views or something.[18] (Bown & Rosenstock, 2022, 0:13:56)

During a similar discussion on *Free Speech Union*, Power explains that cancel culture influenced her decision to leave academia:

[18] See Turner, 2024, for further context.

> [Universities] are very, very prey to cancellation and these kinds of things because they're very concerned about losing money and also their reputation and many of them, even if they started out with grand principles of freedom of speech and dialogue are now completely, have more or less capitulated to, you know, someone sending an email, which is pathetic, so, you know, I'm not interested in these big institutions. (Whitmore, 2022, 0:21:03)

Dissident feminists juxtapose their commitment to "fact" and "free speech" against the "cancel culture" they associate with a hegemonic liberalism. Other trans-exclusionary feminists also represent dissident feminists as unpopular. In her foreword to *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, prominent trans-exclusionary feminist Kathleen Stock contrasts Perry with popular feminism:

> The taboo around discussing the costs of the sexual revolution is enabled by popular feminism. This is because popular feminism is a version of liberal feminism, and liberal feminism in its populist guise is focused mostly on a woman's "right to choose" or "consent", construed incredibly thinly. (2022a, para. 3)

In her review of Perry's book for the *Guardian,* Rachel Cooke likewise differentiates its argument from what she calls "mainstream" feminist books:

> All I can tell you is that while most mainstream publishers are seemingly content to publish feminist books that are both fact-free and clotted to the point of unreadability with jargon … It comes as something of a shock to see a feminist writer with any new ideas at all (the books of her peers are mostly just catalogues of woe lightly sprinkled with personal anecdotes). (2022b, para. 1)

Dissident feminists are very often represented, including by themselves, as decidedly *un*popular. This is an important rhetorical strategy because presenting themselves as unpopular buttresses their arguments about the hegemony of "liberal" feminists. Hall's three

notions of the "popular" are relevant here. I have argued that these dissident feminists are part of the network of reactionary digital politics. Perry's podcast regularly gets upwards of 10,000 views (2023—present), for example, which in conjunction with her (and Harrington's) association with figures like Jordan Peterson, makes them somewhat "popular" in the simple sense that "lots of people like them" (Hall, 1981, p. 351). While I am not privy to the specific demographics of their audiences, it is also clear that Power, Perry and Harrington, like others in their reactionary "ideological family," often position themselves as experts of "common sense," against the (implicitly, fake) experts they associate with the "new class" (see Finlayson, 2021, p. 177). Finlayson argues that proponents of reactionary digital politics tend to frame so-called "new class" intellectuals as "oppressing or victimising those with contrary cultural, political and ethical orientations" (2021, p. 168). Perry repeats this framing in the welcome remarks on her substack:

> I'm Louise Perry, author of *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, the book that almost no one wanted to publish, but which has apparently changed an enormous number of lives for the better—not least my own … I think that it [the book] came along at an important moment. Almost everyone now acknowledges that our sexual culture is dysfunctional but, until recently, it has been difficult for anyone in a progressive milieu to speak honestly about why it is so dysfunctional, for fear of challenging the progressive narrative of feminist history. (n.d., para. 1-4)

In the above passage, Perry simultaneously positions herself as both having "changed an enormous number of lives" and an outsider (n.d., para. 1). That is, she suggests that "new class" capture of Western cultural and social institutions has made "the progressive narrative of feminist history" difficult to challenge (n.d., para. 4). To borrow Hall's terms, she contests the terrain of the "popular" by positioning herself as *un*popular (1981, p. 351). Despite claims like this, dissident feminist ideas circulate widely in popular discourses. The way that these dissident feminists position themselves as unpopular dovetails with how gender critical feminists, more broadly, claim to be silenced. Bassi and LaFleur have written about this:

> In spite of its own self-image as embattled against the feminist global traffic of meaning about gender and the body, the gender-critical movement has nonetheless managed to translate, popularize [emphasis added], and fundamentally reframe within public debate long-standing intellectual conversations about "sex" and "gender" as epistemological categories. (2022, p. 318)

While trans-exclusionary feminist ideas circulate widely in popular discourses from where I am writing in Australia, and do so with far greater influence in the US, the trans-exclusionary feminist movement is more clearly organised, at a domestic level, in the UK. Harrington recently tweeted about this, offering "three cheers, and three more cheers, for America's beleaguered and marginalised TERFs, who have been swimming upstream for years against a loud, wealthy, and ruthlessly institutionalised libfem cartel" (2024). She went on to offer, by way of explanation, that "it's possible to be a TERF and Left-coded in the UK, but in the US that just doesn't compute. People just automatically assume gender-critical women are conservative" (Harrington, 2024). Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent agree with Harrington that gender critical feminists in the UK are more widely published compared to their US counterparts. Ironically, claims that gender critical feminists in the UK make about being silenced are highly visible. Pearce et al. argue that the frequency with which both left- and right-coded UK media outlets publish opinion pieces by gender critical feminists demonstrate that they are not, in fact, marginalised:

> It seems, however, that claims of "silencing" are heard loud and clear in mainstream media and political events held across political lines. In the UK, 'gender critical' opinion pieces are regularly published in both left- and right-leaning outlets including *The Observer, The Guardian, the Daily Telegraph* and *The Mail on Sunday*. (2020, p. 685)

Trans-exclusionary feminist ideas also circulate in other more covert ways. Pearce et al. describe how "essentialist arguments about sex difference" appear often in digital and print

media, establishment and otherwise, without being explicitly associated with feminism, extending even "to higher level political and policy discourses" (2020, p. 688). In Australia as well as in the US and the UK, discourses about the importance of excluding women with high testosterone levels or XY chromosomes from participating in women's sports are common, for example, without being necessarily labelled a TERF position or even associated with feminism. These positions rely on sex and gender essentialism, tying womanhood and female biology tightly together in ways that have a disproportionately negative effect on racialised, especially black and Global South, women (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 688). This is because of what Maria Lugones describes as "the coloniality of gender" (2016). As Lugones discusses,

> only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of "without gender," sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. Women racialized as inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of "women" as it fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism. (2016, p. 52)

The relationship between colonialism and the gender binary further contextualises dissident feminism, adding another dimension to the fact that all three of the women I've chosen to represent it here are white and British.

However dissident Power, Perry and Harrington may be, however much they diverge from the main orthodoxies about men within feminism, many of their ideas along with their specific texts enjoy wide circulation in the West. Power, Perry and Harrington cannot be simply absorbed into the trans-exclusionary feminism on which so much has been written. They differ in their insistence on the extent of natural differences between men and women, and on questions relating to how society should be arranged to account for sexual difference.

While these writers do indeed diverge from the orthodox approach I have identified with Manne, Penny and Srinivasan, it is equally notable that they share one significant mode of argumentation in that they all make sweeping claims about men, often by citing examples from the manosphere. And as I will now show through analysis of Power's *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022a) and Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* (2023a), dissident feminism reproduces heteropessimism and buttresses the influence of popular misogyny.

Nina Power

In this section, I argue that by identifying "sex-realism" as the only solution to the gendered antagonisms caused by "liberals," and also by positioning men as victims, Nina Power reproduces a feminist heteropessimism with much in common with the popular misogyny of the manosphere. Power's political and intellectual allegiances are hard to pin down. Her first book, *One Dimensional Woman* (2009), repudiated the then popular notion that women had reached the heights of emancipation. Instead, Power argued that feminism had been co-opted by and become complicit with capitalism and as a result faced an existential crisis. Surveying woman's situation, Power saw an incredibly depressing state of affairs. With the mass entry of women into paid employment and the shift from manufacturing to service-based industries, Western society had undergone what she and many others call a "feminisation" (Power, 2009, p. 20). No longer systematically excluded from the public sphere, women now faced an inverse problem—they could no longer find reprieve from the public sphere. Even their private lives were being infiltrated by a process of hyper-marketisation. In a context where it was believed that the road to liberation was paved with consumption and that to be "empowered" women had to make commodities of themselves, Power argued that serious feminist political thought had all but disappeared. Feminism had found itself at a crossroads. For Power, if that trajectory continued, feminism would completely lose its radical potential. In this book, Power asks whether feminism is destined to become yet another discourse on which capitalist markets could parasitically feast.

Fast-forward ten or so years and Power is still grappling with similar questions. Now, however, her focus is men and masculinity. In *What Do Men Want?* (2022), Power inverts Sigmund Freud's (in)famous question—"What does Woman want?"—and uses it as a prompt to address what she sees as a number of untrue but widely held ideas about men in contemporary Western culture: that all men benefit from a patriarchal dividend; that men are inherently violent; and, that masculinity is toxic. Against this assessment, Power argues that many men are already good, and that older norms of masculinity have a (currently elided) value worth reviving:

> We have lost sight today of the possibility of linking masculinity to *goodness* — and this, above all, is what I want to defend. How to get there? We could … begin by questioning "outdated" versions of masculinity. We could say … that masculinity "needs to change" because most versions of it are a "blight" on society; or we could shift a little and say that perhaps we need to resurrect what was good about older kinds of masculinity in the name of a different image of the present and future. Many men are *already* good, which is to say they look after themselves and others, care for their families, sacrifice their time and energy to making the world a better place for all: it is unfair and untrue therefore to damn men and masculinity *as such*. (2022, p. 28)

Power also cites examples from the manosphere to make this argument. Counter to orthodox feminism's representation of the manosphere as a congregation of vile misogynists, she offers a more positive evaluation. Of incels, for example, Power writes:

> Many of these young men are economically deprived, living in miserable small towns without much hope of secure employment, let alone many of the other trappings of middle-class life and future prospects, and yet they can be charming and funny and inventive online. (2022, p. 27)

Power thus suggests that incels deserve sympathy—in part because to prevent violence its

causes must first be understood—and that, in any case, what incels produce is not primarily toxic misogyny but humour and, at times, even lucid ideological critique. The vast majority of incels are not, according to her, violent, dangerous and in need of censorship, they are outsider creatives: "When these young men come together to commiserate online they are not only sharing their resentment at being unable to find love, but are creating a community for outsiders" (Power, 2022, p. 26). Many incels, for Power, do not therefore deserve only sympathy; they also deserve respect. She engages charitably with manosphere groups with which she is less in agreement too because, again, she considers it better to try and understand the men we fear rather than merely to isolate and ostracise them (Power, 2022, p. 26). Though Power does not share MGTOW's view that women exploit and oppress men, she understands the attraction of male separatism for some men. She thinks that the desire to remove oneself from Western culture makes particular sense for men:

> Is MGTOW a brave assertion of male sovereignty in the face of women who are deemed to seek only money, security, children and status, or is it rather a way of rationalizing other desires—to spend more time with other men, or to protect oneself from heartbreak? Are women really exploiting and oppressing men on such a large scale? Male separatism, as extreme as it sounds, might today make a certain kind of perverse sense, given that the options for "being together" in the contemporary world sometimes appear so unattractive. (Power, 2022, p. 122)

For Power, what the manosphere ultimately represents is a genuine, if imperfect, attempt by men to reconcile with the disorienting nature of life under capitalism, which she claims is dually characterised by infantilism and horizontalism. She argues that under capitalism people never have to grow up, at least not in any meaningful sense (Power, 2022, p. 69). For her, to grow up means: taking the risk to foster and sustain connections with ourselves, others and the world; making deliberate and considered choices about what kind of person we want to be; and, ultimately, assuming responsibility for our own lives rather than blaming others for any unhappiness or lack of fulfilment we experience. Power considers

"capitalism" to be a far more useful term than patriarchy. In place of overturning or even ameliorating patriarchy, in fact, she dismisses "patriarchy" as a name "for a set of confusions" (Power, 2022, p. 69). Reminiscent of arguments that Gary S. Cross (2008) and Michael Kimmel (2009) have made more specifically about boys and men, Power argues that capitalism encourages people to remain in a perpetual state of adolescence—"to have fun, be completely selfish and pleasure-seeking" (2022, p. 7). For Power, everyone is a perpetual adolescent, regardless of their gender. This also means that no one has any moral wisdom to impart. It is therefore unsurprising that the bonds between people are extremely thin. Power contends that in the absence of role models from whom to learn to live well, which is to say without a metaphorical Father to lay down the moral law and thereby coalesce people into a community, the capitalist injunction "to enjoy" fills the void. The issue is therefore not, in her view, that we are yet to dismantle patriarchy but rather that we have dismantled patriarchy too well. A horizontal capitalism now flourishes, in which, Power tells us, the only "responsibility" people have is to consume:

> By dismantling patriarchy, via tote bags or otherwise, we have also collectively done away with all the *positive* dimensions of patriarchy as well: the protective father, the responsible man, the paternalistic attitude that exhibits care and compassion rather than simply places constraints on freedom. If anything, we have dismantled patriarchy in a rather extreme way, resulting in a horizontal, competitive society that suits consumer capitalism very well. (2022, p. 41)

At the same time, Power asserts that contemporary Western culture is extremely puritanical such that "if we make a mistake, or become the target of others, there is no limit to the social punishment that can be meted out" (Power, 2022, p. 7). In *What Do Men Want?*, Power attempts the difficult task of pointing a way out of this simultaneously hedonistic yet puritanical predicament.

I argued in the previous chapter that the orthodox approach to men within popular feminism evinces a politically limiting despair. I therefore agree with the sentiment behind the

question Power poses: "But if men are just 'like that,' if they somehow constitutively loathe and disrespect women, then how can anyone do anything about it?" (2022, p. 6). I have relatedly argued that, in order to move beyond a zero-sum cultural game, feminism needs to ask new questions about its ethical and political obligations, including, pressingly, how it engages with men. That said, I disagree profoundly with Power about the extent to which biological functions determine the possibilities of human life and therefore take my distance from the remedy she proposes. Because underpinning Power's solutions is a simple insistence that men and women are naturally different:

> A world where biological sex would be noted for medical and reproductive purposes, but otherwise would be of little concern in day-to-day life … clashes with some of our deepest intuitions about sexual difference: that men and women are different, even if, in many situations, these differences don't or shouldn't matter. (2022, p. 73)

Power wants neither to abolish sex as a social organising principle, nor to live in a world without binary sex roles. Far from it, by "recentering nature" Power says she wants to emphasise sexual difference, while not rendering one sex subordinate to the other. This has a colonial undertone—the very means by which Power advocates escaping commodified culture seems premised on, if not a white possessive relationship to "nature," as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) has labelled it, then certainly, to borrow again from Sarah Brouillette and Astrid Lorange's writing on tradwifery, "a mythic and irretrievable *before* of gendered difference" (2024, para. 3). Power does not acknowledge how racial dynamics inform her desire for, or image of, "natural" gendered difference. This also contextualises why she is in favour of reviving male initiation rituals like those, as discussed in chapter one, practiced by men in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement:

> If we are to find ourselves again, as men or women or children, nature has to be a central part of this journey. [Robert] Bly suggests that this kind of feral, primal mentorship or initiation is profoundly lacking in Western culture—older men do not, as a rule, welcome the "younger man into the ancient, mythologized, instinctive male

> world". Where might younger men get their wisdom from today? Men can only, ultimately, imitate men, Bly argues: "'Initiators say that boys need a second birth, this time a birth from men". Initiation into manhood has been eroded by a secular culture that sees no need to mark the passages of time, except in the most cursory way. (2022, p. 86)

Because Power, like Bly, believes that boys need male role models in order to become good men—again, premised on her commitment to innately binary sexual difference—she mostly frames this masculinism positively. In Power's estimation, masculinist texts do not generally endorse misogyny but rather provide examples for how men and women might live together in a harmonious and complementary way:

> Masculinist texts do not, it seems to me, necessarily encourage misogyny. On the contrary, they describe a world in which men and women live and work together. A certain kind of metropolitan 'egalitarianism' would find this kind of traditionalism unpalatable, no doubt, but if 'equality' just means being equally crushable by the labour market and by an unhealthy culture, there's nothing to be gained there either, and nothing to be lost by turning one's back on modernity as such. (2022, p. 89)

In the above passage, as throughout her text, Power assumes that our only options are *either* equality as sameness *or* an entrenched gender binary. My question is: Why? And why is further entrenching a gender binary necessary to free people from commodification? What about gender-diverse people, about people who do not fit neatly into either the category of "man" or of "woman," is specially linked to capitalist consumption? Or trans-men and women, for that matter? Power implies that members of these groups have become attached to mistaken identities, fallen into the trap of commodification, and are "all-too-compatible with a culture obsessed with branding" (2022, p. 2). This is not only politically short-sighted on her part but also intellectually betrays a lack of openness to understanding what queer identities can and do mean for people. Here, Power slips into generalisation, although generalisation by her own account betrays a resentment. In fact, Power presents a relatively banal statement— human

beings are generally a dimorphic species—but presents it as though to express as much is forbidden in contemporary left or feminist discourses without any support for this assumption.[19] I agree with Power that it would be strange to deny the fact that human beings have bodies that have to be reckoned with and made sense of and cannot think of anyone arguing against this. What is often emphasised, however, is that the process of "making sense" of human bodies is never a purely biological question but also always involves social inscription, meaning that it is contestable and open to change (see, for example, Butler, 2024; Gill-Peterson, 2024; Serano, 2016). This is not to say that the body is a *tabula rasa* whose meanings are easily subject to radical overhaul. It is instead to say that, in light of biological facticity, we can nevertheless collectively determine the meanings of the body.

Power cites examples from the manosphere to argue that reaffirming the "natural" differences between men and women is the antidote to a zero-sum cultural game between them. She does so without acknowledging that such a reaffirmation extends the policing of gendered boundaries and licences violence against people of non-normative gender identities and expressions. Far from freeing people from commodification, further entrenching the gender binary renders people who do not fit neatly within it, including many cis men and women, both less visible (as in, less represented) and hypervisible (as in, subject to unwelcome attention, including of the most egregious kinds). These are in and of themselves effects of marginalisation that effect additional marginalisation in turn. Under Power's proposal, everyone would be under more scrutiny; everyone would be more vulnerable to discrimination. In a strong sense, for these reasons, Power's proposal exacerbates rather than reduces existing gendered antagonisms, including between men and feminism. In identifying "sex-realism" as the only solution to gendered antagonisms Perry also attaches her argument to the idea of natural inequality between the sexes, especially because she also repeats the positioning of men as victims found across the manosphere. Power reinforces, under the name of feminism, heteropessimism and influence of popular misogyny.

[19]This is of course not to deny the existence of intersex people (see Das, 2020).

Louise Perry

In this section, I argue that despite her critical posture towards the manosphere, Louise Perry actively reinforces the heteropessimism and influence of popular misogyny. In *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022a), Perry, similarly to Power, criticises a number of "popular" ideas regarding how men and women can and should relate to each other. She claims these are pervasive and pernicious due to the ascendancy of a "liberal feminism" that privileges individual freedom above all else. Most generally, and unsurprisingly given the title of her book, Perry takes aim at the notion that the 1960s sexual revolution resulted in unambiguously improved relations between men and women. She argues, contra this, that what the sexual revolution most profoundly effected was a shift in the social status afforded to sex. Inspired by Max Weber's argument that the enlightenment effected a disenchantment from the natural world, Perry claims that contemporary gendered relations are characterised by "sexual disenchantment" (2022a, p. 11). In the aftermath of the sexual revolution, she contends, sex no longer has sacred or even special status and is now merely considered one social interaction among many, of equal standing to most others. For Perry, this is what the dominant "hyper-progressive ideology" would have us believe:

> Sexual disenchantment is a natural consequence of the liberal privileging of freedom over all other values, because, if you want to be utterly free, you have to take aim at any kind of social restrictions that limit you, particularly the belief that sex has some unique, intangible value—some specialness that is difficult to rationalise. From this belief in the specialness of sex comes a host of potentially unwelcome phenomena, including patriarchal religious systems. But when we attempt to disenchant sex, and so pretend that this particular act is neither uniquely wonderful nor uniquely violating, then there is another cost. That cost falls disproportionately on women. (2022a, p. 11)

Throughout this book, Perry refers to the manosphere in three overlapping ways. First, when demonstrating the logical slippages, internal inconsistencies sand contradictions within liberal feminism. Second, as evidence for her belief that men and women are intractably different as

a result of infamously difficult to delineate social and biological causes. And third, when arguing that the post-sexual revolution sexual culture, characterised as she asserts it is by sexual disenchantment, serves men—and really only a minority of high-status men—more than women.

One of the most provocative arguments Perry makes in this book is that rape is not what contemporary feminists claim it is. Given their shared commitment to "socialisation theory," she asserts, liberal and radical feminists (by "radical" she means Marxist feminists) argue that rape is a violent act much more about male power than sexual desire. If rape is not importantly connected to sexual desire, Perry asks, why are women most likely to be raped at the age they are considered most attractive? And why are men most likely to rape at the age at which their sex drive peaks? Perry contends that liberal and radical feminists tend to double down on "socialisation theory" and explain these patterns circularly. Instead of doing this, Perry argues that feminists—indeed, women as a sex class—would be better off accepting the explanation offered by evolutionary psychology: that rape is "an aggressive expression of sexual desire" (2022a, p. 36). To accept this, she admits, means accepting the trade-off that rape is "one method by which males can reproduce—it confers, in some situations, a selection advantage" and is in this sense natural (Perry, 2022a, p. 37). It is on this basis that she criticises the two groups that most fervently reject this claim—men's rights activists and feminists:

> Resistance to this research evidence comes from two very different groups, both of whom tend either to ignore the data or quibble with it, and often end up — perversely — echoing each other. The first is anti-feminist men's rights activists, and the second is those feminists who, in an effort to be as inclusive as possible, deliberately avoid making any generalisations about either rapists or their victims. (Perry, 2022a, p. 37)

Perry suggests that men's rights activists are unwilling to accept the truth, as she sees it, that rape is not a sex-neutral but rather a male crime. Here, as throughout her text, when Perry references the manosphere, she does so with a more critical posture than Power; it is fair to say that she has less sympathy for these men than Power. In the above passage, moreover, she

implies that reticence among contemporary feminists to generalise has made it more difficult to identify sex-specific patterns in crime, thereby inadvertently and ironically buttressing claims made by men's rights activists. Unlike Perry, and like the contemporary feminists whom Perry criticises, Power discourages generalising, considering it to be a primary driver of resentment between men and women.[20] Perry instead asserts that generalising is required for a "practical" feminist politics (2022a, p. 181).

Perry is, however, aligned more with Power in her commitment to innately binary sexual difference; she even has a chapter entitled "Men and Women Are Different" (2022a, pp. 21-45). While Power's commitment to innately binary sexual difference serves for her as a reason to extend sympathy to men, including to men involved in the manosphere, not so straightforwardly so for Perry. She supports longer sentences for rapists, for instance, because she believes that men are evolutionarily programmed to rape: "I would like convicted rapists to spend much longer in prison—their whole lives, if needs be—because I have very little faith in the effectiveness of sex offender rehabilitation programmes" (Perry, 2022a, p. 41). With respect to whether men are a source of despair, then, Perry seems to agree less with Power than with orthodox feminist Kate Manne. "If rape is indeed a product of evolution," Perry argues, "does that make it inevitable? Well, not necessarily, but it certainly does make it more difficult to eradicate" (2022a, p. 24). It is worth parsing here the specifics of her reasoning because they raise particular questions about her feminist relation to men. Contending that rape is to some extent a natural male behaviour, Perry cannot consider it a genuine expression of men's agency as orthodox feminism does. Why, then, does Perry advocate punishing men for enacting what is, by her own account, in their nature? If men are prisoners of their evolutionary instincts, is this not a reason to extend them sympathy? In fact, Perry's views

[20] Although, as I have just argued, Power herself also generalises about men, women and gender-diverse people.

suggest men's violent nature cannot change and also that they should be punished for acting on it. Like Manne, it is thus Perry's despair about men that makes her sceptical about extending them any sympathy. Unlike Manne, though, it is not men's agency that is the source of her despair. It is their very nature.

In a chapter entitled "People Are Not Products" (2022a), Perry further argues that liberal feminist inconsistency on the question of sex work effectively buttresses claims made by incels. Against a backdrop of sexual disenchantment wherein sex is positioned as just another possible social interaction among many, Perry asserts that for liberal feminists the only appropriate feminist response to a woman who consents to make a commodity of herself is supporting her. Perry sees in this a contradiction with an equally liberal feminist outrage at the incel claim that men have a right to women's bodies—and a right to treat women like commodities. This, Perry argues, is a right liberal feminists endorse in the context of sex. Perry writes:

> take, as another example of liberal feminist inconsistency, the panic around incels: involuntarily celibate men who gather online to complain about their lack of success in attracting girlfriends … I don't think that incels are owed sexual access to anyone, whether or not 'cash is redistributed in compensation'. But note the difference in tone between a passage such as this—'*we* don't owe you sex' and '*our* vaginas'—compared to other progressive pieces on sex work … When it is the sexual integrity of prostituted women that's at stake, a ruthless pragmatism takes hold, and liberal feminists are concerned only with reducing the harm resulting from stigma. But when it is non-prostituted women whose bodies are at risk of 'redistribution', suddenly sexual disenchantment is forgotten, to be replaced by pure rage. (2022a, pp. 152-154)

This supposed inconsistency belies, for Perry, that "even the best liberals do still *feel* that sex is somehow different, even if they struggle to articulate the difference" (2022a, p. 150). Despite being some of the main proponents of sexual disenchantment, Perry claims, liberal feminists cannot even themselves transcend the reality of sex. The reality, according to Perry, is that sex importantly differs from other social interactions, and that sex importantly differs for men and women. Try as they might to pretend that sex is nothing special by making ever-more dissonant claims about "choice" and "freedom," Perry contends, liberal feminists never quite succeed.

Nor do men involved in the manosphere, for that matter. As she does with liberal feminists, Perry considers NoFappers in particular to be symptomatic of a sexual culture that at once disavows yet expresses the non-interchangeability of sex. While Perry sees liberal feminists as endorsing a disenchanted sexual culture, she sees NoFappers as simultaneously embodying and alive to the perversity of sexual disenchantment and, for this reason, attempting to resist it. As she represents them, NoFappers are men who are trying to stop compulsively masturbating and watching porn by seeking support from other men facing the same issue. As a result of sexual disenchantment's attendant commodification of sex—and of women, in particular—Perry sees at least some NoFappers as so beholden to their base sexual drives that they are both physically and psychologically desensitised to sex:

> Members of the NoFap subreddit sometimes write of masturbating so often that they give themselves painful abrasions, and many report suffering from 'death grip syndrome', a quasi-medical term used to describe the loss of sensation that can sometimes result from masturbating too aggressively. Sufferers report finding it difficult or impossible to reach orgasm during sex with another person, partly because of physical desensitisation and partly because of the psychological effect of porn use. Even if they are motivated to seek out sex with a real person, psychological death grip may mean that they cannot become aroused by someone whose body isn't exactly like that of a porn star. (2022a, p. 110)

Perry and these men agree that, even though it is pervasively and pornographically represented in popular culture, sex remains special. Despite their best efforts to change, however, NoFappers can neither physically nor psychologically experience the specialness of sex. For this reason, Perry does have some sympathy for them, at least more so than she does for incels or men's rights activists. In the above passage, for example, note how she refers to these men as "sufferers" (Perry, 2022a, p. 110).

On many questions, including the question of sex work, Perry holds radically different positions to Srinivasan. Yet there is a symmetry between them insofar as both criticise the limitations of consent and the ascendancy of sex positivity within contemporary feminism. Both also consider how these limitations might cause men suffering, not exclusively women. This leads Srinivasan to encourage women to get involved in intersectional anti-capitalist politics. It leads Perry to encourage women to, well, get married:

> The task for practically minded feminists, then, is to deter men from cad mode. Our current sexual culture does not do that, but it could. In order to change the incentive structure, we would need a technology that discourages short-termism in male sexual behaviour, protects the economic interests of mothers, and creates a stable environment for the raising of children. And we do already have such a technology, even if it is old, clunky and prone to periodic failure. It's called monogamous marriage. (2022a, p. 181)

Perry's representation of the manosphere overlaps with Power's in that both share a commitment to innately binary sexual difference. What I have argued about Power's proposal to further entrench binary gender is also true of Perry's insistence that men and women are naturally different. If enforced, Perry's ideas would serve to radically exacerbate rather than reduce existing gendered antagonisms. The fact that Perry positions marriage as the primary means through which women can improve their lives, however, expresses a level of despair about men that is not present in Power's work. Perry reifies the idea that men and feminism

are necessarily antagonistic even more so than Power, for whom reaffirming the "natural" differences between men and women is the antidote to zero-sum relations between them. In Perry's telling, men are positioned in default opposition to the goals of feminism, not only by choice but by their very nature. Perry's resultant despair about men also reproduces the related notion that men pose a fundamental risk to women, for which her only proposed remedy is incentivising men to protect "their" woman from other men by reviving a socially conservative form of marriage. Despite her critical posture towards the manosphere, many of Perry's ideas—men and women are naturally different, men are naturally violent, women are naturally agreeable—circulate both across the manosphere, but also more broadly across the network of reactionary digital politics to which she belongs. Perry is thus a contributor to an emergent mode of popular feminism that not only expresses heteropessimism, but also reinforces the influence of popular misogyny.

Mary Harrington

In this final section, I argue that Mary Harrington's feminism reinforces the influence of the manosphere and a heteropessimistic view of the world by conflating male biology, men and violence, and arguing against gender-affirming medical care, sex work, abortion and the contraceptive pill, among much else. In the context of my argument, Harrington's *Feminism Against Progress* (2023a) represents the most dissident feminist (con)text I will consider here. Her overarching intention is to expose liberal linear progress—the notion that social relations necessarily improve over time—as a myth. Doing so is a precondition, in her view, for two urgent feminist tasks: reevaluating the history of feminism in the West, and orienting feminism differently towards the future. Like Power and Perry, Harrington theorises a dichotomy between, on the one hand, embodiment, care and interdependence, and, on the other, disembodiment, freedom and alienation. She criticises the latter trio for disguising the reality of technology—namely, that it is not, as is so often claimed, the solution to societal problems but rather their cause. A view she shares with Power and Perry, Harrington argues that the fact that technology is an ever greater part of our lives does not signal liberation, but that humans have steered away from their nature. It is perverse that technological capture is permitted to

pass for progress in contemporary Western culture, she asserts, and feminists should be against it. Hence the title of her book. Harrington is against technological interventions, but also other kinds of intervention, that threaten an essentialised equation of women's traditional roles with their "nature." She is against gender-affirming medical care, sex work, abortion and the contraceptive pill, for example, ambivalent about free childcare, and in favour of marriage, the nuclear family and sex-segregated social spaces. With reference to these positions, Harrington calls herself a "reactionary" feminist.

I have been arguing in this chapter that dissident feminism aligns in many respects with the manosphere. I have also been arguing, throughout this thesis, that the manosphere, orthodox feminism and dissident feminism all align with respect to their heteropessimistic visions of Western gendered relations. It is therefore interesting to note that Harrington argues that the manosphere has a mutually reinforcing relationship with "progressive feminism." Progressive feminism, for Harrington, purports to emphasise freedom and empowerment but in reality encourages alienation through self-commodification (2023a, p. 94). While Power seeks to defend men against progressive feminism and Perry seeks to demonstrate how progressive feminism inadvertently buttresses a sexually disenchanted sexual culture that serves only a high-status minority of men, Harrington's critique of progressive feminism is the most targeted and severe. She argues that contemporary feminism is dominated by a "cyborg theology" that assumes liberation can be achieved through technologically-enabled disembodiment, and that this serves the interests of a high-status minority of "female knowledge professionals" for whom female biology is experienced only as an obstacle to overcome so as to better compete with men for professional advancement (Harrington, 2023a, p. 150). Harrington disagrees more fervently with this theology when it is peddled under the guise of transgender rights, which she insists do not serve the interests of most women, and especially not "enslaved, agrarian, developing-world or otherwise less privileged women" (2023a, p. 150). She is scathingly critical of progressive feminism, in other words, because she considers it anti-woman.

Similarly to Perry, Harrington claims that progressive feminism's intertwined history

with cyborg theology is such that it is partly, and ironically, responsible for the emergence of the manosphere. Harrington suggests that by presenting as freedom what is in reality a form of alienation, progressive feminists have helped to create a culture in which it is now incredibly difficult and rare for people to have fulfilling relationships and to sustain connections with others:

> The market mindset has suffused the domain of sex and relationships far more widely than a few online communities of angry and unhappy men. In that context, the surprise shouldn't be how many men or women view sex in this bleak light, but that there remain any who don't. (2023a, pp. 97-98)

As a consequence, Harrington finds it unsurprising that some men—meaning men involved in the manosphere—conflate legitimate grievances, including those against progressive feminism, with a more general anti-woman stance. While progressive feminist and manosphere worldviews undoubtedly differ in their respective normative prescriptions, she contends that they share a commodified understanding of human relationships:

> These men and women appear to be antagonists, but in truth both camps embrace a worldview so marinaded [sic] in the Hayekian vision of "spontaneous order" via markets, that (like Reagan-era Republicans) the only solution they can imagine to 'sexual market failure' is further competition, deregulation and self-commodification. (Harrington, 2023a, p. 95)

Due to their shared "market mindset," Harrington claims, progressive feminists and men of the manosphere actually align with one another on issues like marriage and sex work. While bemoaning the trend in the West for people to marry less and later in life, for example, she notes that both progressive feminists and MGTOW are against marriage:

> Feminist and male-separatist views differ mainly in what advantage they claim the opposite sex is covertly pursuing via marriage. For feminist critics, it's a bait-and-switch designed to trap women into low-status drudgery and sexual subordination. For

> male-separatists, it's a bait-and-switch designed to trap men into a permanent 'provider' status. (Harrington, 2023a, p. 87)

There is another respect in which Harrington is more like Perry than Power in her discussion of the manosphere. Harrington does not consider progressive feminism solely culpable for existing resentment between men and women. Men of the manosphere are also culpable, she argues, because they react to progressive feminism not by seeking to redress the alienation it presents as freedom but by extending it through calls for greater social licence to treat women as commodities. Although avowedly against progressive feminism, for example, incels conform to cyborg theology when, just like progressive feminists, they advocate further normalising sex work:

> This dynamic has driven a growing all-male "incel" subculture of unhappy males who see little realistic prospect of forming a family, and blame women for their unhappiness. But even here, the only solution seems to be more of the same. One female journalist who often writes about sex and intimacy recently shared with me an email she received from an "incel," in which he argues in this vein that more and freer prostitution is the only solution for men's suffering. The asymmetry in sexual access will, he suggests, self-correct if only we can extend freedom and trade further into the sexual domain and "completely allow sex work," thus "completing the sexual revolution and letting liberty reign". (Harrington, 2023a, p. 94)

That said, in a chapter entitled "Let Men Be" (2023a), Harrington does clearly express sympathy for men, although still premised on a despairing stance towards them. Like Power, she argues that to foster solidarity and move beyond zero-sum relations between men and women, cyborg theology's attendant "meat lego gnosticism" must be challenged (Harrington, 2023a, p. 134). For Harrington, "meat lego gnosticism" refers to an understanding of the body as a burden from which human subjects need to be freed (2023a, p. 134). To challenge "meat lego gnosticism," she advocates for sex-segregated social spaces and, diverging from gender critical feminists in endorsing not just all-female spaces but also all-male spaces, makes "the

case for men being freer to exclude women" (Harrington, 2023a, p. 204). Failure to recognise the natural physiological and behavioural differences between men and women, Harrington argues, is bad for "both" (her phrasing) sexes. Premised on the false assumption that men and women are "fungible," she asserts, the doctrine of gender neutrality dangerously obscures the natural differences between them. The most important of these natural differences are tied again to male violence. According to Harrington: "Bluntly, men are orders of magnitude stronger and more physically violent than women" (2023a, p. 200).

It is thus on the basis of an avowed conflation between male biology, men and violence, that Harrington advocates for the importance of sex-segregated spaces. In her view, keeping women safe requires, due to man's natural inclination towards violence, keeping men away from them: "We simply need to recognise that the effort to eradicate all-male social spaces, norms and aesthetics, or to treat such phenomena as malign by definition, is antithetical to women's broader interests" (Harrington, 2023a, p. 204). In the other direction, too, keeping men safe requires keeping women away from them due to their inherent sexual drive fuelling a tendency to compete with one another. Like Perry, Harrington assumes that men are naturally violent or, more accurately, that male biology is inherently violent. More than Perry, however, Harrington considers men's violence a reason to extend them sympathy or, in her words, to "let men be" (2023a, p. 190). Feminist politics, as she understands them, requires letting men have spaces in which they can enact their violent and competitive nature free from the disrupting force of women:

> This means recognising that good men are forged not just by women but also by beneficial competition with other men. We cannot, after all, wring our hands about men's ailing mental health while reacting with fear and hostility to every fraternal organisation that focuses on practical activities and produces, apparently as a side-effect, more confident and well-adjusted men. (Harrington, 2023a, p. 205)

I want to contend here that Harrington's sweeping anti-technology and anti-progress stances render homogenous what are in actuality diverse issues, each with its own specific set

of implications for differently situated women. While uncritical tech-solutionism is worth holding up to scrutiny, *Feminism Against Progress* is plagued with unjustified conflation and intellectual disingenuity. Like the feminisms that Power and Perry respectively endorse, Harrington's reactionary feminism is premised on innate and binary sexual difference. Since her critique of progressive feminism is more severe, however, so too is her transphobia more explicit and extreme. Within the prevailing cyborg theology, she asserts, the proposed solution to oppressive gender norms has become the forceful submission of embodied sex to medical intervention. On the basis of two anecdotes, Harrington positions trans people as, at best, over-correcting cultural dupes who have inadvertently fallen prey to "meat lego gnosticism" as a result of feeling uncomfortable about their societally ordained gender role. In her view, progressive feminism's alienated version of "empowerment" and man-hating are largely responsible for this (Harrington, 2023a, p. 134). However, Harrington also positions trans people—really, trans women—as the most duplicitous opportunists who, again on the basis of innately biological male violence, sexual drive and competitiveness, pose an intractable and fundamental risk to cis women. Even more so than Power and Perry, it is transphobia that centrally informs Harrington's heteropessimistic ideas about men. For Harrington, violence is inherent to male biology and this determines the possible relations between men and women. This is borne out by the fact that her proposed remedy to resentment between men and women—sex-segregated spaces—is premised on heteropessimistic notions of an inherent antagonism between men and women. Harrington simply cannot imagine a person with male biology not being violent. She also views any woman who does not conform to her imaginary of pre-modern womanhood as in some sense "unnatural." The consequences of this most acutely apply to trans women, who make use of modern interventions, technological and otherwise, to live more fulfilling lives. It also applies more broadly to women, however, which is why Harrington's project is not limited to attacking trans people, although transphobia is fundamental to it. Harrington is against progressive feminism, in fact, because it permits men and women to act in ways that do not conform to her fantasy of men's and women's pre-modern social roles. By conflating male biology, man and violence, and arguing against

gender-affirming medical care, sex work, abortion and the contraceptive pill, among other things, Harrington's dissident feminism reproduces many of the ideas found in the manosphere. While Harrington does not identify as conservative, she presents not only a profoundly heteropessimistic, but also misogynistic, picture of the world.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that dissident feminism expresses a genuine and worrying alignment between an emerging mode of popular feminism and the manosphere. The dissident mode of heteropessimism speaks about natural inequality between men and women in similar terms to the manosphere groups and figures I have discussed in chapter one. While men involved in the manosphere articulate heteropessimistic grievances by mobilising misogynistic images of women as cruel, manipulative, and at once sexually promiscuous and withholding, each of these dissident feminists, to differing degrees, agrees with these men that liberal/progressive feminists bear much responsibility for a despair-inducing Western sexual culture. Dissident feminists also share with manosphere voices the tendency to advance some socially conservative ideas, and others that are more libertarian, or that defy simple categorisation. I have suggested that to make sense of this it is helpful to think of dissident feminism as the feminist part of reactionary digital politics. Despite being in contest over the meaning of "feminist," dissident feminists also share with orthodox feminism despair about contemporary Western gendered relations, and particularly about men. Both these emerging modes of popular feminism use the manosphere to shore up their heteropessimistic order of things, and it is thus crucial to emphasise that heteropessimism is also what these feminisms share with popular misogyny.

Chapter Five:

Hope, or other ways to think about men in feminism

> To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.
>
> — Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*

Moments of feminist despair about men

One. I attend Kate Manne's closing address at the Sydney Writers Festival with a friend, a fellow postgraduate student whose PhD is on contemporary anti-feminist backlash in China. In "The Future of Misogyny," according to the festival website, Manne will "consider what recent activism has changed, what has resolutely stayed the same and what has worsened" (Sydney Writers' Festival, 2024a). The talk is far from hopeful. At one point, she proclaims "The future is bleak" to the packed auditorium (see Sydney Writers' Festival, 2024b, 24:34). Does Manne think it possible to circumvent this bleak future? Not certainly, and certainly not through dialogue with men. Concerning men's motivations for gendered violence, she is resolute: "On my account of misogyny, we do not need to know" (Sydney Writers' Festival, 2024b, 30:32). When Manne's talk ends, her heteropessimistic feminism is met with heavy applause. My friend and I turn to each other. She shrugs her shoulders and says, "Inspiring." I scrunch up my forehead.

Two. I scroll upon a Twitter/X post from Mary Harrington: "Well-meaning liberal sex 'educators' are blind to the dark side of male sexuality and enabling the worst kind of predator" (2022). I click on the attached article, entitled "Why we sacrifice young girls: we're in denial about male desire" (2023b). In it, Harrington claims that men's sexuality is naturally violent, even paedophilic, and implies that society, in response to this "fact," needs to be more sex-segregated. She writes:

> When men abuse very young girls, it may be about many things. It may be legitimised

> or concealed in many ways, and for many reasons. But it is, in part, simply a sex thing. That is: those men who molest very young girls do it because they can, and because they like it. If this is so, it has immense implications for keeping girls safe. Effective measures would probably involve a realism about our sexed differences that would translate in practice to (for example) a presumption of suspicion toward adult men that would likely curb the operations of a serial womaniser but would also have far-reaching effects on our currently largely co-ed society. (Harrington, 2023b, para. 19)

What Harrington packages as "realism" is in fact her commitment to a heteropessimistic order of things, in which "man" equals "male biology" equals "violent." It is not possible to have hope about men with reference to Harrington, only resignation. Nor is it even possible to view men as anything other than natural threats to women.

Three. I give a lecture to undergraduate students on Asa Seresin's concept of heteropessimism. I ask my students, the (overwhelming) majority of whom identify as feminists, if they resonate with her argument about feelings of disappointment, embarrassment or even despair about current forms of heterosexual relationships, especially about being in one, coupled with an inability to imagine heterosexuality as anything but irredeemable (2019). I get emphatic head nods of yes. I ask if anyone cares to expand, to tell me why, and I get roughly two kinds of answers. Both focus on interpersonal dynamics between heterosexual men and women. Neither is hopeful. The first: "Men are stupid—they don't even notice when they hurt their girlfriends' feelings." I can't decide whether the second is more or less despairing: "Men know more than they let on; they notice when, for example, there are dirty dishes in the sink or the laundry needs doing—but they also know that if they pretend not to notice for long enough, their girlfriend or wife is likely to attend to it. Men weaponise incompetence." The consensus in the room, then, is that (heterosexual) men either don't know, or know but don't care, about the women with whom they are ostensibly closest.

My students' further response to this seems to be: "So why should feminists care about

men?" A fair question. One obvious way to answer is to point out that although holding up received ideas about what it means to be a man to critical scrutiny, many feminists continue to express a fundamentally caring disposition towards men. Feminists have sought to expand men's as well as women's possible ways of being, including their emotional range. And they have often done so in contexts in which what regularly passes as care would more aptly be described as patriarchal control.

Meaghan Morris describes anecdotes as "allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working" (1988b, p. 7), and I include these anecdotes here to provide a sense of some of the ways despair about men is currently "working" in Western popular feminist culture. This thesis is about the heteropessimism of both popular misogyny and popular feminism. Analysing the heteropessimism found in both radical feminism and the manosphere, I have argued that a marked absence of hope, or a marked presence of despair, characterises the approach to men in both of what I am terming "orthodox" and "dissident" feminisms. I have shown that this affective situation is partly produced by the fact that these modes of popular feminism draw conclusions about "man" as a general social category by citing examples from the manosphere. My critique of how this selection of highly visible "problem" men is shaping the affects about men that are intelligible in and as "feminism" does not deny that misogyny is a central feature of the manosphere. Nor does it deny that men outside the manosphere can be misogynistic. My aim has rather been to show that metonymically sliding from "manosphere" to "man" is imbricated with reductive understandings of men that reinforce heteropessimism and naturalise misogyny.

Introduction

Building on arguments made in previous chapters, this final chapter suggests that one way to surpass the political limitations of orthodox and dissident feminist approaches to men is to

make hope about men more popular in modes of Western feminism. But not just any kind of hope. Alive to the ways that unduly cheery and empty platitudes about hope obscure—and thus reproduce—the very power dynamics they claim to be addressing, the kind of hope about men I want to advocate here is an embodied and affective orientation towards the past, present and future that is mutually constituted by refusal and sustained by anger. To do this, I begin by describing some of the ways in which feminists have figured the connection between feminism and feelings. I then examine the tenuous relationship between hope and politics. I follow this with an excursus into anger to consider how it is expressed and received differently depending on matters of gender and race. The final section proposes some of the benefits of making hope about men more popular in modes of Western feminism. I discuss Silverbloom's "hope as refusal" and then argue, with the help of Jacqueline Rose, that *hope as refusal about men* would allow feminists to see and relate to men as other than irredeemable sources of gendered antagonism. I also argue that it might better position feminists (of all genders) against the right-wing consolidation of power currently taking place across the globe, including in so-called advanced Western democracies (see Butler, 2024).

Feeling feminist and feminist feeling

As this chapter sets out to discuss hope as a feminist affect, in this opening section I want simply to describe some of the ways that feminists have thought about the connection between feminism and feelings. The first comes from Elspeth Probyn. In 2005, in the introduction to her book on shame entitled *Blush* (p. 8), Probyn asked: "What is it about feelings that causes critics to flee?" This might be true of critics in general, but the same cannot be said of contemporary feminist critics. It is not my project here to explicate the distinctions and relations between feelings, affects, and emotions. Yet the politics of feelings and, inversely, the feelings of politics, have been subject to extensive feminist examination for decades. Influential feminist books about feelings include Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013), parts of which I draw on below, Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (2008) and *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2002).

About men, specifically, Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) offers a compelling account of homosocial desire, and in *The Will to Change* (2004) bell hooks advances a well-known argument about how patriarchy psychically mutilates men, encouraging them to express anger and repress other emotions. There are countless others, of course.[21] Feminist interest in feelings is perhaps unsurprising, in part for the reason Probyn gives for being herself "especially interested in the ways feminists grapple with making sense of emotions"—namely, because "we women have been historically associated with the realm of feeling" (2005, p. 8). Feminists are concerned with the status of women—or, as Probyn puts it, "the project of representing women has been a condition of possibility for feminism and continues to provide the underlying epistemological basis for the articulation of feminism" (1993, p. 7). Since women have an entrenched and ambivalent relationship to feelings, it makes sense for feminists to be interested in feelings, as well as to be "especially" so, as is the case with Probyn, in other feminists' interest in feelings.

Feminist theorising of feelings has scrutinised the gendered consequences of what is still an all-too-common understanding of knowledge, which, with roots in so-called Cartesian dualism, exalts an unattached knower or disinterested observer and assumes the superiority of "a view from nowhere" (to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway) (Haraway, 1988). Dualist paradigms often portray feeling as an excess that needs to be repressed or removed for universal and eternal truth to reveal itself (see Budgeon, 2015; Lennon & Wilde, 2019). Feminists of various persuasions have argued, against this, that questions about the body and embodiment are inextricably connected to feelings and emotions. Hélène Cixous (1976) stresses how writing is an embodied practice through which women can construct identities, for example, while Teresa de Lauretis speaks about the heterogeneity and contradictions of seeking to fix in place "the female subject of feminism" (1986). (Early) Moira Gatens (1995) argues against a sex/gender distinction on the grounds that it fails to grasp bodily specificity

[21] See, for example, Cvetkovich, 2003; Halberstam, 2011; Moi, 1995; Ngai, 2004; Povinelli, 2006; Seigworth & Gregg, 2021.

and the ways that bodies interact with each other and the world in which they're embedded, and (early) Rosie Braidotti describes feminist philosophy as "the activity aimed at articulating the questions of individual embodied, gendered identity with issues related to political subjectivity, connecting them both with the problem of knowledge and epistemological legitimation" (1993, p. 3).

Luce Irigaray (1985) argues that throughout the history of Western thought "woman" has not been a distinctly feminine position but rather has served as the speculum upon which the masculine ego projects itself, reflecting back at itself, albeit in an obscured, differentiated form. Her suggestion, in light of this, is that women should cultivate their own female symbolic rather than strive for representation within the male symbolic. Similarly concerned with the ways in which patriarchy obscures, but also constructs, gendered differences, Judith Butler emphasises how bodily repetition produces meaning, including the categorisation of sexed bodies (1993). Even Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2014), despite facing criticism for exalting a masculine subjectivity, points to the impossibility of separating mind from body (see also Deutscher, 2008; Driscoll, 2013; Moi, 2008). Throughout her ground-breaking book, Beauvoir describes the various forces through which the girl-then-woman is taken (by others and herself) as Other. She argues that Woman is a Subject like Man who, to justify her freedom, needs perpetually to transcend the facts of her situation and extend towards an indefinitely open future, while patriarchy (a system with which she is complicit) encourages her to deny the truth about herself. Woman's ability to enact her defining freedom—to define herself—is not impossible but certainly more tenuous than it is for Man. In Beauvoir's words: "What singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other" (1949/2014, p. 37).

Influenced by Beauvoir (and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), Iris Marion Young's well-known essay 'Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment

Motility and Spatiality" (1980) also considers the tenuous position girls and women sometimes occupy between "object" and "subject." Young argues that one major phenomenological impact of their ambivalent positioning is that girls and women often simultaneously believe that an action—e.g. the throwing of a ball—can be done by *someone*, just not by them (1980, p. 147). Young claims, similarly to Beauvoir, that since girls and women are "gazed upon as mere body, as shape and flesh," they tend to think of themselves "as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention" (1980, p. 154). While these corporeal feminists (as they are sometimes called) reject patriarchal imaginings that define women as "mere" bodies, they also challenge the very dichotomy that underpins these dominant ideas about knowledge and subjectivity. Elizabeth Grosz does this in *Volatile Bodies* (1994/2020), for example. Employing the metaphor of the möbius strip to describe "the inflection of mind into body and body into mind," Grosz argues that "through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another" (1994/2020, p. xii).

Feminists of colour have also incisively intervened in these debates about feeling and knowing by questioning the racial dimensions of gendered embodiment. Maria Lugones uses "the coloniality of gender power" to discuss how colonialism "imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers" (2007, p. 186). Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that feminist standpoint theory is valuable insofar as it troubles a mind/body split, yet reveals its ties to sites of colonial knowledge production by reproducing a body/earth split (2014). In her words:

> While I acknowledge my debt to feminist standpoint theory, my work is also informed by the scholarship of Indigenous researchers. A common thread throughout this work is that Australian Indigenous research paradigms are founded on a of humanness that is predicated on the body's connectedness to our respective countries, human ancestors, creative beings and all living things … As a first-world paradigm, feminist standpoint theory is predicated on a body/earth split discursively positioning women

> as female humans above other non-human living things through making gender/sex the epistemological a priori within analyses of women's lived experiences and socially situated knowledges. (Moreton-Robinson, 2014, p. 335)

In her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "the suppression of Black women's intellectual traditions has made this process of feeling one's way an unavoidable epistemological stance for Black women intellectuals" (1990, p. 19). An important artefact of the Black feminist tradition, contributing authors to *Black Feminist Thought* include Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. In her famous essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Lorde articulates the importance of feeling as: "the white fathers told us, 'I think, therefore I am,' and the Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, 'I feel, therefore I can be free'" (1985, p. 220). The attention to ambivalence in work by feminists of colour complicates feminist accounts of gendered power that position all men as dominant and all women as subordinate. This is useful in the context of my argument for highlighting that the despair about men in orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism is politically limiting.

Returning to Morris, I want to note and agree with her argument that "'feminism' is not a set of approved concerns and methods, a kind of planning code, against which one can measure one's own interests and aspirations" (1988c, p. 168). While she acknowledges that there can at times be value in "arguing that something is *not* feminist [emphasis added]," the task of defining a feminist identity in positive terms is, for her, "almost unintelligible" (Morris, 1988c, p. 168). When arguing that ambivalence is not only a concept central to her analysis but also what might make it "feminist," Morris does define feminism, minimally, as "a movement of discontent with 'the everyday' and with wide-eyed definitions of the everyday as 'the way things are'" (1988c, p. 171). Ambivalence is central to Morris's project, then, because it allows us to notice moments "of everyday discontent—of anger, frustration, sorrow, irritation, hatred, boredom, fatigue" (1988c, p. 171). Ambivalence is feminist, in other words, because it draws attention to feelings. In an important but not exclusive sense, feminism is for

Morris a politics of feelings.

Sara Ahmed arrives at a similar conclusion about the importance of feelings to feminism via a different route. In her chapter "Feminist Attachments" from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013), Ahmed reflects on the formation of her feminist subjectivity in a manner that, for me, recalls Judith Butler's treatment in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) of the mutually constitutive relationship between power and subjects. There, in an attempt to synthesise the theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, Butler argued (against Louis Althusser) that power is not unidirectionally and externally imposed by a centralised state apparatus on an already formed subject who, after undergoing a process of internalisation, then embodies it. Rather, power is implicated in the very formation of the subject as such; power literally makes the subject. At the same time, for Butler, "power loses its appearance of priority … when it is wielded by the subject, a situation that gives rise to the reverse perspective that power is the effect of the subject, and that power is what subjects effect" (1997, p. 13). If the subject and power iteratively constitute each other, how to account for the formation of the subject? Butler's response is to say that the "tropological presumption" of a figure who perpetually turns back on itself represents the limit of what any account of subjectivation can offer (1997, p. 18).[22]

When discussing the role of feelings in her own formation as a feminist subject, Ahmed reproduces this tropological presumption. On the one hand, she argues that feminist subjects are partly formed through always already politically mediated emotional frames, many of which exceed conscious grasp:

[22] Butler suggests that this tropological presumption figures in the work of theorists as different as G.W.F. Hegel, Louis Althusser, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.

> Such emotional journeys are bound up with politicisation … But they are bound up with that politicisation in a mediated rather than immediate way … emotions are what move us, and how we are moved involves interpretations of sensations and feelings not only in the sense that we interpret what we feel, but also in that what we feel might be dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us, but that come before us. (Ahmed, 2013, p. 171)

By highlighting that "what we feel" is dependent on a politics that has "come before us" Ahmed represents politics as conceptually prior to feelings, the politics here being, implicitly, feminist, since she often uses feminism and politics (that she endorses) interchangeably. In Ahmed's account, feminism predisposes feminists to have certain emotional responses—*feminism makes feminists* by making us sensitive to gendered injustice. Though Ahmed considers this process to be largely unconscious, she also demonstrates conscious knowledge of the role that feelings play in feminist development. Reflecting on the process by which she herself became a feminist, Ahmed claims that "I can rewrite my coming into being as a feminist subject in terms of different emotions, or in terms of how my emotions have involved particular readings of the worlds I have inhabited" (2013, p. 171). She then lists these different emotions. Hope is the last of them:

> The anger, the anger that I felt about how being a girl seemed to be about what you shouldn't do; the pain, the pain that I felt as an effect of forms of violence; the love, the love for my mother and for all the women whose capacity for giving has given me life; the wonder, the wonder I felt at the way in which the world came to be organised the way that it is, a wonder that feels the ordinary as surprising; the joy, the joy I felt as I began to make different kinds of connections with others and realise that the world was alive and could take new shapes and forms; and the hope, the hope that guides every moment of refusal and that structures the desire for change with the trembling

> that comes from an opening up of the future, as an opening up of what is possible. (Ahmed, 2013, p. 171)

It would be too neat, here, to suggest that feelings are to feminists what, at the more fundamental level Butler describes, power is to subjects. My concern in this chapter is not to straightforwardly "prove" that Ahmed's account of hope (or, for that matter, anyone else's) is in a simple sense correct or superior to others. My concern is rather to draw on (mostly) feminist writings, including by Ahmed, to make a case for allowing greater space for feminist hope about men in contemporary cultural politics—both why to do this and (tentatively) how to do this. Ahmed's account of the relationship between feelings and feminism is helpful for this purpose, elaborating that feelings are an important part of feminism's power—feelings can motivate feminists to take actions to improve gendered relations. The flip side of this argument is equally true—part of feminism's power lies in its ability to produce particular feelings, particular reactions, and particular kinds of attention. Ahmed shows us that feelings are not reducible to feminist output, nor feminists to emotional output. She also demonstrates how "feminist emotions" (as Alison Jaggar describes them) and feminist subjects are mutually constitutive—you can't have one without the other because, to a significant degree, they make each other up (Jaggar, 1983). While Ahmed describes this relationship between feelings and feminism to lay the groundwork for thinking on a range of affects, of which hope is but one, my interest here is in hope. Staying with Ahmed for the time being, I turn now to consider the relationship between hope and feminist politics.[23]

Hope and politics in feminist theory

In this section, I examine the tenuous relationship between hope and politics in feminist theory. Ahmed positions hope as integral to her becoming a feminist subject. However, each of the other emotions Ahmed discusses—anger, pain, wonder, joy—is introduced by describing

[23] I choose to think closely with Ahmed in this chapter (rather than, say, Lauren Berlant or any number of other possible choices) both because I find her prose accessible and moving, but also because Rachel Silverbloom, whose work I also draw on extensively, draws on Ahmed.

a specific situation in which it was felt. Not so with hope, which Ahmed writes about as required in and for politics at a more general level. She states that "hope guides *every* moment of refusal [emphasis added]" and that it "*structures* the desire for change with the trembling that comes from an opening up of the future [emphasis added]" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 171). Hope, as Ahmed represents it, is thus important all the time, not just some of the time. Hope is not something that *can* be, *might* be, an appropriate reaction to a specific situation. Hope is rather a precondition for feminist politics. To be blunt, hope is for Ahmed what keeps these other emotions politically on track; it guides and steers anger, pain, wonder or joy towards the realisation of justice. Hope keeps other emotions from floundering in the so-called individual, allowing them instead to be expressed, righteously, in and by the collective. As an example of how hope performs this structuring function, according to Ahmed, consider her claim that hope is what ensures anger does not descend into politically counterproductive despair:

> Indeed, it is hope that makes involvement in direct forms of political activism enjoyable: the sense that "gathering together" is about opening up the world, claiming space through "affective bonds" (Roseneil 1995: 99). Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible. Indeed, anger without hope can lead to despair or a sense of tiredness produced by the 'inevitability' of the repetition of that which one is against. (2013, p. 184)

While Ahmed thinks hope is essential for structuring feelings, she makes it clear that hope alone is an insufficient basis for feminist politics. It is not that when hope is present all problems somehow vanish or cease to exist. Ahmed's view, rather, is that "politics without hope is impossible, and hope without politics is a reification of possibility (and becomes merely religious)" (2013, p. 184). For Ahmed, without hope there is no political motivation, and without political motivation there can be no political engagement. The inverse of this situation, in which a person hopes for, say, a world that they do not strive to materialise, is equally fraught. If politics without hope is self-defeating, for Ahmed hope without politics is a "merely

religious" faith limited to the minds of the hopeful persons (2013, p. 184). This is why Ahmed describes such hope, which could also be called standalone or mere hope, as a "reification of possibility" (2013, p. 184). Hope of this kind neither has a meaningful material existence in the present nor strives to have one in the future. Rachel Silverbloom, whose work is influenced by Ahmed, offers an instructive description of this:

> When hope is taken up merely discursively or as an attitude, without the accompanying practices that are required to actualize a desired possibility, it becomes performative (in the increasingly popular, albeit misleading, sense of being empty and invoked only to gain social capital). Or, to borrow from Sara Ahmed (2006), it is non-performative — hope can become a speech act that does not do what it says; saying it becomes a way not to do it. It is this non-performative of hope that often saturates political and everyday discourse, and which is rightly dismissed as such. (2024, p. 817)

Thinking with Ahmed and Silverbloom, hope without politics can be seen as a kind of justification for inaction—a hope that hopes that hope can and will realise itself. Hope of this kind has an existence in the mind of its keeper or keepers who, although seen as more likely to slip into a state of apathy or despair, may even grow increasingly attached to hope as the years wear on. This hope without politics functions to block the realisation of what it "hopes for." Silverbloom articulates this succinctly, observing that when it comes to the "non-performative of hope … saying it becomes a way not to do it" (2024, p. 817). Hope of this kind, which, in her formulation (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 808), is "taken up merely discursively or as an attitude, without the accompanying practices that are required" or, in Ahmed's (2013, p. 184) phrasing, is "without politics," is passive—and *pacifying*. A hope that hopes that politics is redundant.

It could be argued that Ahmed's subsequent work on happiness amounts to a critique of political hope. Certainly, her primary object in *The Promise of Happiness* (2020) seems very close to what Silverbloom criticises as political hope's relationship with "normatively

complicit happiness" (2024, p. 807). This is not the case, however, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013). Take the opening paragraph of Ahmed's section on hope in "Feminist Attachments," in which she states, "My own relationship to feminism has always been imbued with hope, a hope that things can be different, and that the world can take different forms" (2013, p. 184). Contrast this with the way that Silverbloom begins her article "Hope as Refusal: Queer, Feminist Futurity" (2024). Referencing the "Hope" poster from Barack Obama's successful 2008 United States presidential campaign, she is sympathetic to those who reject not only hope without politics but also political hope:

> There are many reasons to be suspicious of, perhaps even sick of, political hope. Hope, difficult to disentangle from normatively complicit happiness and naive optimism, is often linked with race, gender, and class privilege, as well as with the perpetuation of capitalist, colonial, and imperial power … While invocations of hope in political discourse outwardly signal the belief that things will improve—that the future will be better than the present and past—history has shown, as with Barack Obama's US presidential campaign of "HOPE" in 2008, that speaking the language of hope is not the same as doing the work needed to actualize social transformation. (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 807)

While Silverbloom spends longer than Ahmed considering the ideological entanglements of political hope, there is still a significant overlap between their accounts. Critical of hope without politics, like Ahmed, Silverbloom does not take this kind of hope, which blocks rather than supports politics, as a reason to think that hope must be done away with altogether. Instead, she follows Ahmed in arguing that just as there is a need to be critical of hope without politics—to which she adds what commonly passes as political hope—there is an equal need to be vigilant against hopelessness. The political ramifications of an absence of hope must also be considered, she argues, because hopelessness can be just as pacifying as hope, and can slip just as easily into accepting an unjust status quo as inevitable or unchangeable. Understandable though it may be for valid criticism of "naive hope or optimism" to lead a

person to feel as if hope should be rejected outright—which is to say, understandable though it may be, at this historical conjuncture, to become a pessimist—for Silverbloom, pessimism is ultimately a defensive reaction, one which reinforces rather than challenges the status quo (2024, p. 807). She explains:

> It is therefore crucial that hopelessness not collapse into complacency, which regards the present as inevitable, perhaps even "natural." Ahmed helps us to see the ways that this form of complacency is more proximal than one might think, at first glance, to the queer pessimism/negativity that so vehemently critiques it. Disbelief in the possibility of a different world, she explains, can serve as a "psychic defense" against the suffering caused by the expectation of failure (2011, 170). Pessimism, here, becomes a "survival tactic," a way to prepare for disappointment by not permitting oneself to feel hopeful (170). Much like naive hope or optimism, this defensive response to a perceived situation of hopelessness can foreclose careful attention to the historical and contingent causes of present suffering. (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 827)

For Silverbloom as much as for Ahmed, a critique of hope's ideological entanglements should avoid descending into politically counterproductive pessimism. Their feminist politics thus must remain grounded in hope, but of a specific kind. This hope is different from the naive hope or optimism that Silverbloom warns against, which, as Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) have noted (drawing from Terry Eagleton), "is actually deeply conservative—it assumes that things will get better without the need for any genuine investment or hard work" (p. 606). Far from an ideologically entrapped cruel optimism (to borrow a term from Lauren Berlant), the hope that feminist politics needs, according to Ahmed and Silverbloom, exists beyond the "merely discursive" as an "embodied orientation" (2024, p. 807). Silverbloom outlines its contours:

> In my view, hope is both an affect and practice. It names an embodied orientation and relation to what we imagine is possible and how we move around and toward that possibility. Often, embodying hope entails practices of investment (of time, labor,

> resources) that aim to sustain or actualize a possibility; these investments are embodied expressions that we believe it is worthwhile to keep going, that what we are against is not inevitable, and that what we strive for is possible. (2024, p. 807)

The scholars I have canvassed in the first half of this chapter collectively suggest that feminist politics and feelings are mutually constitutive. That hope guides feelings but is itself also a feeling. And that hope needs politics but is also its precondition (though, it is important to note, not its cause). Hope of an embodied, affective kind has shown itself to be a precondition for justice, which transcends the binary between optimism and pessimism. At the same time, hope of this kind has a tenuous rather than inevitable relationship to politics.

Hope and anger

I will shortly be making the case for a feminist hope about men that is predicated on anger. In this section, I want therefore to reappraise the value of anger for feminist politics by evaluating how anger is expressed and received differently depending on matters of (for example) gender and race. One of the best known defences of anger is found in Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981/1997). There, Lorde argued that women's anger is not only or even primarily destructive, but is oftentimes generative:

> Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change … [A]nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification. (1981/1997, p. 280)

I read Mununjali Yugambeh and South Sea Islander scholar Chelsea Watego's argument in favour of anger as an instructive rearticulation of Lorde. Watego makes her case for anger by providing an anecdote from a conference she attended on institutional racism. During the discussion section of a session in which the keynote presenter had repeatedly stated, "We just need to have hope," Watego felt compelled to "put forward a case in defence of anger" (2018, para. 2). To do so, she recounted how anger, in particular her white mother's

anger, had been fundamental in mitigating some of the vile racism to which she, as an Aboriginal girl, was routinely subjected growing up in Australia. The keynote presenter's response was patronising, as Watego describes:

> The keynote presenter metaphorically patted me on the head and explained how she used to get angry, but that it just became "too tiring", and apparently—she advised me—anger alienates people (and again, by people I'm fairly certain she meant white people). (2018, para. 3)

From where Watego was sitting, hope functioned to dismiss the anger of the black people, especially the black women, in the room. Perversely, hope provided the keynote presenter a justification for both her own lack of anger about racism, as well as an excuse for all the other white people in the room (and, by extension, in Australia more broadly) to not have to feel angry about racism. Positioning hope and anger as mutually exclusive, framing anger as an "ineffective" anti-racist strategy and then exalting hope as the only solution, the keynote presenter used hope as a tool to frame her own—in reality, more apathetic—orientation towards racism as the more politically serious and engaged one. Hope, then, clearly does often serve as a way for the already powerful to shore up their power. It can provide us/them with ways to feel good about being on the right side of history—in the pursuit of justice—without actually having to feel angry about injustice. As a result of this experience (and I'm sure other similar ones), Watego does not argue that hope and anger are entangled or that there is a specific kind of hope that is, in fact, politically useful. Her response is rather to reject hope outright, claiming that Black women do not, in the face of racial and gendered injustice, need hope. What they need, according to Watego, is anger—their own as much as white people's.

In arguing for the political value of anger, Watego aligns with the current feminist moment. As Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto put this, "rage is the celebrated feminist affect of the day" (2021, p. 886). Jilly Boyce Kay locates the election of Donald Trump in 2016, as well as shifts in Western sexual culture following #MeToo in 2017, as catalysts for the high visibility of feminist rage today:

> Over the last few years, we have been witnessing an extraordinary new visibility of women's anger. Since the election of Trump in the US and the unprecedented disclosures of gendered abuse that characterised #MeToo, female anger seems to be registering in ways that it has seldom done in recent decades … Rage, it seems, is becoming all the rage … Perhaps the question now is not so much how to summon our anger, but what to do with all this anger now that we have it. (2019, pp. 591-592)

While supportive of the ways that female rage continues to help shine a spotlight on how gendered and pervasive the problem of sexual violence remains, Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill point out that acceptance of women's anger in the West, especially as a legitimate form of feminist praxis, remains unevenly distributed along familiar lines of hierarchical positionalities, tropes and narratives. As they put it:

> Female rage is "having a moment." More and more women are getting publicly and unapologetically angry, particularly in relation to sexual violence, but also in reaction to other forms of sexism, racism and injustice. Yet, it is also clear that the release of female anger in public culture is uneven—in terms of class, race, age, sexuality, disability—and that powerful mechanisms continue long legacies of pathologizing this anger, situating it as a problem with a woman's body, her hormones or her mental state. (Orgad & Gill, 2019, p. 596)

Nash and Pinto complicate matters further in "'A New Genealogy of "Intelligent Rage," or Other Ways to Think about White Women in Feminism" (2021), arguing that the rage directed at white women from Black feminists can itself be politically limiting at times. They critically evaluate some of the highly visible registers—past and present, public and theoretical—in which black feminism directs rage at the "bad object" of the white woman:

> Rage, we argue, has been vividly constructed in multiple feminist forums as specifically directed at white women. This form of rage has a distinctly public life: it is engaged on social media, in trade books, and in digital feminisms as a political commodity that

> makes visible the world-saving work of Black feminism (and Black women) and the world-ending work of white feminisms (and white women). (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 884)

Rage at white women performs a dual function for Black feminists, according to Nash and Pinto (2021, p. 884). Occupying as it does "at this critical moment" a relatively dominant position as "public intellectual work that 'brands' Black feminist public circulation," rage offers Black women an avenue through which to try and get a foothold in the neoliberal university and, for white women, presents an opportunity to participate in a redemption narrative (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 884). While Nash and Pinto underscore the fact that Black women's rage at white women can be a legitimate expression of the "exhaustion of misogynoir in institutional, social, and political life," they are critical nevertheless of how it tends to dovetail with individualist solutions rather than sustained institutional critique (2021, pp. 884, 889). More precisely, Nash and Pinto are wary of the manner in which, however justified it may be, rage directed at white women serves to position white women as irredeemable, which, ironically and problematically, ends up positioning Black women as responsible for "fixing" feminism. In their words:

> Our caution here—following Smith, Lorde, Carby, duCille, Reagon, and Williams—is that if white woman has become the bad object we rail against, the field's new orientation toward the hopeful horizon of the good object of Black woman—an object representing the possibility of freedom for everyone by claiming universality and radical specificity all at once—seems to substitute objects for structure. This feminism would provide emotional care under a new essentialist equation that to labor as and for Black women will finally cure feminism and the institution, if only white women change in control of their affect and self-manage and optimize their affect differently. (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 906)

As the anecdotes at the opening of this chapter demonstrate, feminist despair about men functions similarly, and has similar essentialising effects. Like rage directed at white women,

feminist despair about men finds expression in trade books (my particular focus) and in digital media (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 884). Also, like rage directed at white women, feminist despair about men is understandable yet, in my reading, expresses tensions that arise when heteropessimistic feminisms become increasingly visible cultural positions. And as Nash and Pinto argue is the case for rage directed at white women, despair about men can result in women being positioned as responsible for "fixing" feminism because, within this frame, men are nothing but irredeemable sources of gendered antagonism. In this sense, feminist despair about men displaces the possibility of collaborative feminist politics.

McRobbie's (2009) well-known chapter "Illegible Rage: Post-feminist Disorders" takes up interlocking gendered and sexual dynamics of rage. She argues that young women's feminist anger is "melancholic" in the psychoanalytic sense Judith Butler and Diana Fuss employ when thinking through how homosexual desire is simultaneously preserved and lost via disavowal and displacement. Butler (1993) sees attachment to heterosexuality as melancholic, arguing that desire for the sexually differentiated Other involves an external projection of a desire that also exists internally (albeit in a disavowed form). Fuss argues, similarly, that fashion photographs elicit lesbian desire in order to defuse it, which McRobbie summarises as the "mobilisation of homosexual desire within an overarching visual economy which at the same time forbids it, producing it in order to say no" (2009, p. 12). Drawing on these arguments, McRobbie contends that, within a post-feminist context, young women's feminist anger is displaced into glamorised forms of female suffering. She calls these "post-feminist disorders" (2009). In her words:

> Post-feminist disorders are thus the site for new and even more subtle modes of regulation … Its women (Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell) are inevitably harmed, suffering, deviant, injured in some way. But what I have been arguing is that this kind of pathology is normalised and even glamourised, its symptoms and styles are readily available … In some respects these operate as a self-perpetuating regime, which refutes and disavows the asking of questions which pertain to the critique of masculinity, patriarchy, and the enforcement of norms emanating from the heterosexual matrix.

> They keep young women locked into a hermetic world of feminine ambivalence and distress. (McRobbie, 2009, p. 15)

Examining what I would suggest is a contemporary form of illegible female rage, Amy Dobson and Akane Kanai argue that depictions of young women in television shows in the West (they focus on the US tv shows *Broad City* and *Girls*) increasingly involve what they call "affective dissonance" towards core aspects of post-feminism and popular feminism (2019, p. 771). Rather than express empowerment, confidence and desire for perfection, the young women in these shows display "anger, insecurity, anxiety, and misplaced confidence," which, it is important to note, are not only portrayed as personal failures—as would have been likely ten years ago (Dobson & Kanai, 2019, p. 771). According to Dobson and Kanai, shows like *Broad City* and *Girls* instead connect "young women's insecurities, anxieties, and frustrations to a recessionary neoliberal environment with some reinvigorated awareness of structural inequalities" (2019, p. 772). This is clearly indebted to McRobbie's claims that the displacement of feminist anger makes politics difficult within a post-feminist context, and Dobson and Kanai similarly describe some of the affects to which a "post-recessional" context gives rise. Dobson and Kanai argue that the negative affects listed above demonstrate women's "divestment" from neoliberal feeling rules that associate feminism with the display of positive affects (confidence, capacity, empowerment) (2019, p. 772). I want to suggest here that while the despair about men found in both the orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism is similarly expressive of a divestment in the current state of Western gendered relations, they displace what could otherwise be politically productive feminist anger with a pessimistic (and, therefore, passive) rejection of the way things are. Specifically, heteropessimism displaces feminist politics by making it harder to see men's role in feminism as anything other than that of antagonist. While orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism do involve critique of some of the things McRobbie lists above—at least masculinity, if not also patriarchy—their despair about men significantly curtails their politics.

The rage of the manosphere is profoundly *legible*. Men involved in the manosphere primarily direct their rage at white women. They also express vile racism and misogyny

(sometimes called misogynoir) towards women of colour, but their attachment to a racist hierarchy of desire can also mean that these men feel more slighted by white women—even when the man expressing the rage is not himself white (see Manne, 2017; Srinivasan, 2021). In the first chapter, I discussed the strong connections between the heteropessimism of the manosphere and its misogyny. I have also demonstrated the variability of expressions of heteropessimism across manosphere figures and groups. Where incels can be construed as passive, a figure like Andrew Tate evinces heteropessimism largely through misogynistic rage. Copland is instructive for connecting the rage of men involved in the manosphere with affects like despair and nihilism. Adapting Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (2008), which serves "to mediate and manage the social contradictions that arise from women's sexual and affective allegiance to a phallocentric ideology that has, in practice, denied women power, privilege, and presence in the public and private spheres," Copland identifies the manosphere as a primary site of "male complaint" (2022, p. 243). He argues:

> For the vast majority of MM, this complaint about their injury is likely as far as they will go in their participation in the community. Complaint, for many, is enough in and of itself. The Manosphere becomes a space where men can vent and attempt to continue to live their lives. However, for a small minority, this is not the case. For these men, complaint morphs into a nihilistic sentiment, which is expressed either by anger and rage or through depression and suicidal ideation. (Copland, 2022, pp. 111-112)

For Copland, MGTOW are the manosphere group most expressive of this specifically nihilistic rage. MGTOW purport not to want to have anything to do with women, and Copland suggests that their "rancour and rage act as an emotional outlet that allows men (in theory) to live their own value set" (2022, p. 120). Copland's "male complaint" connects to what I have been terming the heteropessimism of the manosphere, which Grace Sharkey also describes, focusing specifically on the figure of the incel, as "(cruel) hope" or "cruel optimism" (borrowing from Berlant) (2021). The rage of men involved in the manosphere is partly a rejection of the "way things are" and this, as Copland suggests, "could present a queer potential" (2022, p.

198). Rather than channel their anger towards critique of heteronormativity, however, as we have seen, these men reinvest "in the structures of heteronormativity" (Copland, 2022, p. 198). Sharkey similarly sees in the incel a missed opportunity. She contends that whatever subversive potential the incel may have is ultimately wasted because "incels blame feminism for [their] arrested development … [this] failure becomes a crucial logic of inceldom" (Sharkey, 2021, p. 45). In other words, the nihilistic rage of men involved in the manosphere is intimately connected to their desire to extend oppressive social hierarchies. Heteropessimism is a central feature of the manosphere's harmful influence over the terrain of popular culture.

This discussion of anger has demonstrated the fact that gendered and racial differences have profound impacts on how anger is both expressed and received. This section has also highlighted some political considerations relating to anger salient to my argument about the heteropessimism that reiterates across a range of (con)texts including the manosphere, radical feminist positions throughout the late 1960s-1980s, and orthodox and dissident feminisms. Although the political value of anger varies greatly depending on matters of gender, race and sexuality (among other complex markers), and despite the importance of hope to anger being challenged (e.g. by Watego), anger can clearly be politically valuable to feminism. In this section, I have considered some of the problematics related to questions of whether and how hope can be a politically productive affect for feminists to hold in relations with and to men. What I want to do in the final section of this chapter is make the case for a hope about men predicated on anger, and for a feminist anger predicated on hope.

Hope as refusal *about men*

In this final section, I argue for making hope about men more popular in modes of Western feminism. I first discuss Silverbloom's "hope as refusal" and then contend, with the help of Jacqueline Rose, that *hope as refusal about men* would allow feminists to see and relate to men as other than irredeemable sources of gendered antagonism. I also argue that this hope might better position feminists (of all genders) against the increasing influence of popular misogyny and, more broadly, the right-wing consolidation of power currently taking place across the globe, including in so-called advanced Western democracies (see Butler, 2024). My

account of hope draws principally on Silverbloom's account of hope, which in turn is heavily influenced by Ahmed and Lorde. Silverbloom also draws on Saidiya Hartman's work of "critical fabulation," which can be said to comprise "close narration, speculative history, and documentary poetics" (2024, p. 823). Though, as we have seen, Ahmed represents anger without hope as tending towards despair, she also represents hope as intimately related to refusal—recall her phrase, "Hope guides every moment of refusal" (2013, p. 171). For Silverbloom, this refusal is a synthesis of hope and anger that is fundamental for queer, feminist politics. Silverbloom doesn't dismiss anger, or view it as dangerous or destructive. In her account, anger at an unjust present has the potential to transform refusal from the mere desire to negate the present—the desire for things that currently are not to be—into something active, something able to produce a politically useful kind of hope, which, as per the title of her article, she calls "hope as refusal":

> Our refusals of the present (and the past with which it is continuous) teach us that its violence is not inevitable. *This refusal of the inevitability of what hurts is hope; this hope for another world, and the striving for its possibility, is refusal.* It is important that we think these together, that we hold them in intimate proximity, so that we do not succumb to despair and exhaustion, nor to complacency or complicity. These are the contours of what I am calling hope as refusal [emphasis added]. (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 819)

Silverbloom's own examples of hope as refusal come from Hartman's book about black intimate life in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Philadelphia and New York, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), and also Hartman's work with Tina Campt and others in the "Practicing Refusal Collective" (2024, p. 811). Silverbloom writes movingly about this critical fabulation, seeing it as "imagining what could have been (but has been erased) and what might still yet come to be in the light of such a counterhistory" (2024, p. 823). This critical fabulation is as much about alternative pasts as about potential futures, and it exemplifies hope as refusal by operating, according to Silverbloom, "in the grammatical register of the subjunctive" (2024, p. 823). Of *Wayward Lives*, Silverbloom writes:

> Hope as refusal characterizes both the methodology and the subject matter of *Wayward Lives*. Hartman describes the book as an exploration of "the utopian longings and the promise of a future world that resided in waywardness and the refusal to be governed" (2019, xv). The stories she narrates and fabulates are about acts of defiance and creativity, circumstances where "the poor assemble, improvise the forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them" (4). There is not a moment in the book where refusal and hope are considered mutually exclusive. (2024, p. 823)

By thinking with Ahmed, Lorde and Hartman, Silverblooom is able not only to hold hope and refusal "in intimate proximity" but also to trouble the idea that there is a one-sided relationship between hope and anger (2024, p. 819). Silverbloom shows us that since anger is integral to producing hope as refusal—which is to say, to producing defiance, creativity, improvisation and experimentation—the value of anger for feminist politics is not limited to the fact that it allows injustice to be interpreted as such (2024, pp. 823, 828). Nor should anger be considered a phase that, however important, must eventually be replaced by the more "productive" affect of hope. Rather, anger must remain for hope as refusal to sustain. Silverbloom articulates this well:

> This silencing of political anger, which is still common today, relies on a framework that sets up an overly simplistic and false binary opposition between positive, creative affects like hope and negative, destructive affects like anger. Refusals like anger are depicted as a stage that must be overcome and abandoned in order to facilitate the hope purportedly required for political solidarity and creative action. Lorde rightly rejects this framework and argues that anger is "loaded within formation and energy" about the situation of oppression and its possibilities for resistance (1997, 280). Most influentially for my theorization of hope as refusal, she also refuses the characterization of anger as stuck in the past and as merely reactive—instead, she insists that anger is also futurally oriented, since it not only is against something but

> also for something that must be actualized through collective action. (2024, p. 817)

As much as anger needs hope to guide it away from despair, hope also needs anger to ensure that it avoids turning into complacency about the status quo. Hope rethought as refusal is able to "place critical pressure on the present and strive for the dissolution of its hold on the future" (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 820). As a refusal of the present, anger can orient us differently towards the future, transforming the future from a sentence foreclosed by what is to a question of what could and should be. I want now to propose some of the benefits of making *hope as refusal about men* more popular in modes of Western feminism.

Clues for how we might enact *hope as refusal about men* are found in Jacqueline Rose's recent book, *On Violence and On Violence Against Women* (2021) and relate to understanding feminism, as articulated earlier, as a politics of feelings. By making *hope as refusal about men* more popular in and as feminism, feminists of all genders can pay greater attention to, and thus facilitate the production of, men's feelings in a way that does not conform to patriarchal positionalities, tropes and narratives. Feminists can also challenge the idea that the best or only way for men to demonstrate commitment to feminist politics is to make themselves smaller, to not speak, to not feel. Part of the reason why Rose is instructive for this purpose is because she distances herself from the radical feminism identified with Catherine MacKinnon. Rose argues against this radical feminism by drawing attention to a paradox. The conceptual framework through which MacKinnon's radical feminism attempts to liberate women, in her view, fixes men in an unchangeable toxic masculinity. This renders inevitable the reproduction of the very patriarchal social conditions that it purports to resist. If men are in total control of their actions and their effects, Rose asks, what resources do feminists have left to work with? I have been expressing a similar sentiment throughout this thesis. Rose is critical of radical feminism for its failure to extend to men the profoundly feminist insight that there is always a gap between the way people experience the pain (and pleasure) of becoming gendered, the disorienting nature of theirs and others' sexuality, and the gender they publicly perform. I have been critical of orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism for their politically limiting despair about men.

For Rose (2021), "it is crucial that, even while calling out masculinity in its worst guise, we allow to individual men the potential gap between maleness and the infinite complexity of the human mind" (p. 9). Rather than shun "beyond the remit of the human" the potential for violence that exists within us all, as Rose claims radical feminism does, *hope as refusal about men* allows for the possibility that "no man comfortably possesses masculinity" (p. 10). Far from a pure expression of men's inherent nature, men's desire for mastery (when and where it exists) can be understood as "the very delusion which underpins the deranged and most highly prized version of masculinity on offer" (2021, pp. 10, 175). Rose draws on Hannah Arendt's concept of the "impotence of bigness"—whereby a person refuses to accept their human limits, instead lashing out and punishing others—to identify thoughtlessness as the fundamental cause of men's violence against women (2021, p. 10). For her, thoughtlessness is an act of radical self-deceit whereby a person represses the violent elements of their inner life—again, elements that she considers existing within us all—such that they are not consciously accessible. Rose argues that making violence unthinkable by positioning violence as the sole purview of men serves to entrench violence, reinscribing a simplistic moral schema in which woman = "good" and man = "bad." Similarly, I have argued that by sharing the heteropessimism that underpins so much of the misogyny of the manosphere, orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism reinforce the influence of popular misogyny.

I want to contend that a form of hope about men that is anchored by "refusal of the inevitability of what hurts" would strike the right balance between holding men's violent behaviour up to critical scrutiny wherever it exists while placing enough import on striving for "another world" (Silverbloom, 2024, p. 819). *Hope as refusal about men* would require feminists, in the first instance, to be open to the possibility of feminist men and women (and people who do not fit into either category) working alongside each other to improve gendered relations. Orthodox and dissident feminisms make collaboration, good faith, and especially the possibility of redeemable heterosexuality, more difficult to imagine, yet through their despair about men they also and ironically express an attachment to binary gender. By

contrast, if *hope as refusal about men* were more popular within Western feminism, this would allow greater space for detaching binary gender from human experience. The emphasis on practice in Siverbloom's account of hope would also safeguard against *hope as refusal about men* becoming a passive hope—the kind that hopes hope makes politics redundant. It would steer feminist anger away from its current pessimism, which merely desires to negate the present but does not cultivate an alternative future. *Hope as refusal about men* would require feminists (of all genders) to act. It would provide an imperative to collaborate with feminist men, while also sustaining much needed critique of patriarchy and masculine domination. Without ever descending into misogynist apologia, *hope as refusal about men* moves us away from heteropessimism towards a politics of affinity.

Conclusion:

Giving up giving up

In this thesis, I have stressed the importance of context to feminist practice. I have argued that "positions" facilitate attention to the entanglement of context and meaning. And I have suggested that there is both a feeling to politics, and a politics to feelings. What I would like to do in this conclusion is write in a more personal register about my own feelings on the themes of this thesis. I suppose I consider myself a child of the Australian New Left. My Dad is a documentary filmmaker, whose work focuses on the connections between labor struggles and social movements. My Mum is a theatre worker (actor, director, dramaturg) who works with communities, often marginalised communities, to tell their stories. My parents met in Brisbane, Queensland, in the 1970s, which at the time was governed by an infamously anti-democratic Premier named Joe Bjelke-Petersen (see Shaw, 2019). I grew up around lots of people who would describe themselves as "leftists," basically, including so many (single and partnered) lesbian women that it was not until primary school that I found out that having two mums was a deviation from "normal." This is all a roundabout way of contextualising my attachment to the term "feminist." In high school, I remember being made fun of because feminism was the political tradition I wanted to focus on for my major project. I also remember the male teacher joining in with the boys in the class…

Onto the topic of "men." If I have long been attached to feminism, I have also long been attached to men. This attachment has had many affective forms: anger, frustration, arousal, concern, perplexion, excitement, curiosity, joy. My first best friend in kindergarten was a boy. In primary school, as I have alluded to in the introduction, I played lunchtime sports with boys as well as (although less) girls. I always had both "guy" and "girl" friends in high school. I have always also identified as a feminist. For me, it has been vitally important *as a feminist* to insist on the complexity, ambivalence and plurality of men just as it has to insist on the complexity, ambivalence and plurality of women and gender diverse people. When certain versions of feminism gained popularity in the mid- 2010s, as cathartic as I found it to join in with refrains

of “I hate men,” there was always also a part of me that felt disquieted. And this disquiet is one reason why, in chapter one, I insisted on treating the discursive conventions of the manosphere as highly specific misogynistic objects rather than merely reflections of timeless misogynistic norms. Believing as I do, following Hall, that the way an object is represented serves to construct the particular relations it can have with other objects, my aim in the first chapter was to make the connection clear between the manosphere’s heteropessimism and its misogyny (Hall, 1997, pp. 16-20). I wanted to demonstrate the fact that heteropessimism is not, as I feel it is increasingly taken to be, a politically productive sensibility.

The close relationships I have with men, and the countless interactions I have with men who are strangers to me, have in common their being “men.” But what is the (contextually specific) content of that category? And what role have feminisms past played in producing that content? The more I started to feel that the claims about men being made under the banner of feminism were at odds not only with many of my own experiences with men (although aligned with some), but more importantly with the kind of collaborationist and communal forms of politics I grew up with, the more I wanted to learn about past feminist positions towards questions of men, masculinity and sexual violence. To learn more about the current conjuncture, my aim in chapter two was thus to notice *when, where* and *why* radical feminists throughout the late 1960s-1980s were resistant to seeing men as potential collaborators in feminist struggles.

It was easy for me understand why a group of misogynistic men would be heteropessimistic, and easier still to understand why their heteropessimism would be undergirded by a fixed imaginary of inherently cruel “womanhood.” What was less explicable to me, and what I explored in chapter three, was why feminists of progressive and even utopian persuasions would choose to extract general insights about “man” from a particularly toxic group of men. Frankly, I have much in common with the positions that I call “orthodox.” I share many of the same concerns about, for example, the increasing power of misogyny, and the prevalence of sexual, domestic and other forms of gendered violence. I can therefore most easily sympathise with, ironically, their hesitancy about extending sympathy to men. Yet I am

also deeply concerned with the way that misogyny dovetails with other right-wing political agendas. And in the current conjuncture, the choice to draw on the manosphere for theorising on men seems to me a way for these feminists to prove what they already take to be true: men cannot be trusted, men are necessarily antagonistic to feminism. On the one hand, heteropessimism informs the choice to draw on the manosphere. While on the other, the choice to draw on the manosphere leads to heteropessimistic analysis in which men are irredeemable agents of patriarchy. Heteropessimism is also what unites orthodox feminism and the manosphere. This should give progressive feminists pause.

Writing chapter four required me to regulate my feelings somewhat. Although I understand that "feminism" does not mean "incontrovertible good" but rather is a contextually and continually contested term, it nevertheless did *feel* to me that the dissident feminists were sneaking some things into the category of "feminism" that didn't belong. The dissident mode of popular feminism is curious, if profoundly troubling, because for feminists like myself, who are critical of the conflation of feminism with simplistic ideas about individual women's capacity, at first glance it seems to offer us something of an alternative. But what they "offer" us is at once profoundly heteropessimistic and deeply attached to binary gender. Similarly to the orthodox feminists, these dissident feminists choose the manosphere as a set of objects because it allows them to tell a particular story about men and women. Unlike the orthodox feminists, however, the story dissident feminists tell is one in which men and women are biologically determined beings—men are inherently violent, women are nurturing, people who live outside of that binary are invalid. Also central to their story is the idea that to address the current dysfunctional state of gendered relations, we need to further entrench, rather than contest, binary gender as a social and cultural organising principle. Dissident feminists thus align with the manosphere both in terms of their heteropessimistic assessment of contemporary sexual culture, and the heteropessimistic solutions they propose.

Chapter five was energising, if a little bit daunting. I had spent much of the thesis in the critical mode, demonstrating connections between the manosphere, radical feminists past, and orthodox and dissident modes of popular feminism. I had made claims about despair

being limiting, but I had not yet made the case for why hope was better. This was my goal in chapter five. I needed to walk a fairly fine line between acknowledging the various ways in which hope can serve, in certain respects like sympathy, to reproduce the very hierarchies it claims to contest. Yet I feel strongly that hope is a necessary precondition for feminist struggle. The question for me was about the kind of hope. What kind of hope would be able to maintain critique of masculine domination, while creating an imperative to collaborate with men? I have advocated for a feminist hope about men that is an embodied and affective orientation towards the past, present and future, as well as mutually constituted by refusal and sustained by anger. I have called this *hope as refusal about men*.

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A thesis has various constraints to do with length, structure, ambitions institutionally directed towards novelty, acknowledgement of the field, and argumentative scope, and there are several areas arising from this research that could be further considered. Topics I feel are clearly worth further exploration include: how feminist heteropessimism is articulated in more specific as well as non-Western (con)texts; how what I have called *hope as refusal about men* could be more visible; how the publishing industry is informing heteropessimistic understandings of men's role in feminism, including through the digital labour and persona- building practices it requires on the part of feminist authors; a longer history of Western feminist heteropessimism; and, the importance of questions of style and aesthetics to people's willingness to identify with various forms of masculinist or feminist politics. There is also an ironic tension in this thesis that I would like to restate. My focus has been partly on the effects of seeing through a narrow prism of gender, but it has required that I myself focus, fairly narrowly, on gender. I have situated dissident feminism and the manosphere within a network of reactionary digital politics, and marked connections between heteropessimism, misogyny, transphobia, and racial and gendered bio-essentialisms, but what exceeds "gender" in that network of connections could be considered more closely.

This thesis is nevertheless both scholarly and political. It makes a contribution to discussions about how to classify feminist responses to the manosphere. More broadly, this

thesis contributes to debates about the relationship between how feminists represent men, masculinity and misogyny, and Western cultural understandings of what it means to *be* a feminist, to *feel* feminist and to *do* feminist politics. Feminist focus on these matters is desirable for pragmatic reasons, but it also draws attention to how popular misogyny is influencing feminist understandings of what it means to be a man. Interdisciplinary and definitively feminist in its approach, this thesis draws on and contributes to a constellation of scholarly conversations rather than just one. I have spoken to feminist critiques of post-feminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism; on feminist history, masculinity studies, and feminist affect theory. Entangling critical discourse analysis with close reading, I have aimed to make heteropessimistic cultural patterns discernible, but also to demonstrate the importance of not merely skimming sites of cultural production for their similarities. I have tried to keep contexts in mind. My critique of how the manosphere as a loose group of highly visible "problem" men is shaping the affects about men that are intelligible in and as "feminism" is not in any way to deny that men outside the manosphere can be misogynistic. Nor is it to deny that misogyny is a central feature of the manosphere. I hope it does, however, show that metonymically sliding from "manosphere" to "man" reinforces heteropessimism and naturalises misogyny. I have not advocated for feminists to simply tell more positive stories about men but I have insisted that it is important to maintain the possibility of men's role within feminism being something other than antagonist.

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"If all men are men of the manosphere, how do we as feminists not give up?" is perhaps another way of articulating the central question I have sought to address in this thesis. I have marked a distinction here between the mode of giving up on men that I take to be expressed by orthodox feminism, which due to its social constructionist outlook maintains a putative belief in men, and the giving up on men expressed by dissident feminism, which comes packaged as sympathy for men but denies men and women much if any agency (and denies the very existence of people living outside that binary). "Giving up" in the title I gave this conclusion

means a lot of different things. You might give up something because you think it is bad for you, or you might want to give something up but find it hard to because, at one level, you really don't want to. Or, you might "genuinely" want to give something up, but not want to give up all the things that giving that thing up requires. You might, say, want to give up smoking but not want to give up the time for pause and reflection that a "smoko break" provides. In any case, the act of giving something up is always motivated by trying to keep something else. As Adam Phillips says:

> Giving up is always sacrificing something in the service of something deemed to be better. The question, whenever we want to do anything, whenever we make a choice, is unavoidably: what will we have to give up? (2024, p. 13)

This thesis has been concerned with the things that feminists give up when they give up on men. I have argued that giving up on men requires giving up quite a lot: collaboration; good faith; the possibility of redeemable heterosexuality; even detaching binary gender from human experience. Of course, giving up on men also involves gaining and keeping certain things too: catharsis; self-protection; maybe even the identity of "woman." I have argued in this thesis that the tradeoffs are not worth it. This is to say, I have argued that feminists should give up giving up on men. Not giving up on men means giving up on feminist strategies that exalt the morality of "woman" and express despair towards "man" at the expense of a more productive feminist politics. I have sought to demonstrate that not giving up on men does not have to mean giving up righteous anger about vile misogyny, transphobia and racism. In fact, I have argued that not giving up on men allows for anger, so fundamentally important to feminist politics, to remain—and not merely as the desire to negate the present or as a precursor to hope. Giving up on giving up on men allows anger as hope to orient feminism differently towards the future, transforming the future from a sentence foreclosed by what is to a question of what could and should be.

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