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Affective conjunctions: Social norms, semiotic circuits, and fantasy

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Abstract

Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that characterize sexual meanings, messages, and mandates in a contemporary Western context invoke choice, liberation, and mastery to propel a perpetually performing female sexuality. Agency and autonomy have been co-opted as robust scaffolding for regulatory regimes, such that practices of mandatory self-objectification and self-surveillance are rebranded as playful practices arising from a range of preferences. We plot several intersecting theoretical coordinates, along which sexuality is usefully traced: affect scholarship, Lacanian and post-Lacanian feminist psychoanalysis, and feminist poststructuralism. This is followed by two elaborated examples from an ongoing research project on sexual agency and desire among young women. Our analysis traverses these varied but interconnected theoretical frames, arguing for their joint usefulness in thinking about how sexual messages and ideologies permeate and persist across social and psychic spaces, with both resistance and recapitulation at work. We join a body of feminist scholarship directed at expanding epistemic and empirical conversations beyond sexual empowerment/oppression oppositions by addressing the ways social meanings, symbolic representations, affects, and fantasy about sexuality cohere in subjectivities.

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The 'turn to affect' in critical theory scholarship (Clough, 2007) represents an attempt to theorize beyond language and representation, to locate embodiment and emotions as entangled but unspecified patternings that "produce the sites, scenes and episodes of social life" (Wetherell, 2013a, p. 358). With its commitment to the historical and political dimension of emotional life, affect theory spans a broad range of conceptualizations and disciplines, with varying degrees of alignment and tension with feminist poststructuralism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis (e.g., Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Cvetkovich, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008a, 2008b). Affect theory attends to affect's travels along social tracks, forming feeling collectivities that reside in a range of bodies (physical, social, technological; Wetherell, 2013a), creating "the very effects of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 117). Affects, in this sense, refer to "states of being" that do not reside in individuals, but constitute part of a circuitry of feelings and responses among individuals (Hemmings, 2005, p. 551). The contagiousness of a yawn or laughter are among examples provided to demonstrate the reciprocal movement of affects (Tomkins, 1963). In other words, social interaction entails an exchange of affect, wherein a catalogue of previously registered affective experiences is reactivated and enacted. This move to considering affect as a critical object has been positioned in many circles as epistemically and empirically superior ground (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Sedgwick, 2003; Thrift, 2008a, 2008b), presumably because affect exceeds linguistic and symbolic dimensions and thus requires an analytics of affect *qua* affect. Critics of the illusory divide between the discursive and affective interpretive methods (e.g., Blackman, 2012; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hemmings; 2005; Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012, 2013a) argue that affect cannot be theoretically or empirically excised from the discursive universe which it inhabits—social rules, institutional practices, the contingency of power, linguistic resources and limits, and the "entanglement for human social actors [that] occurs routinely between embodied states and the semiotic" (Wetherell, 2013a, p. 353). The discursive and representational wrapping cannot be stripped of affect.[1] In other words, affects are not free-standing fasteners that randomly latch on to non-specific subjects or bodies. In as much as bodies are both biological and social entities, they are experienced and read by subjects (selves and others) in the context of specific culturally shared meanings, rules, and symbols (i.e., discourses and semiotic markers). Embodied experiences and practices are, thus, connected to affects that index reservoirs of historically invested meaning making. While affective attachments can certainly be directed at any number of objects (ideas, people, things, institutions) and may be surprising (or experienced as such by specific subjects), as Sedgwick (2003) asserts, this does not mean that such attachments are accidental (Hemmings, 2005). Affects are not "autonomous" as Massumi (2002) contends, devoid of past or future; they reside in relation to specific sociopolitical anchors, thus alighting on bodies and identities that are differentiated by location, power, and intelligibility (Hemmings,

2005).[2] In the context of sexuality specifically, because all subjects must navigate a gendered landscape of meanings, norms, prohibitions, and possibilities, affects attached to sexuality must pass through a gendered system of discourses and semiotic significance (Butler, 1997; de Lauretis, 1994).

It is this inhabiting, residential aspect of sexuality, tangled up in semiotic circuits (i.e., symbols and signs associated with sexuality) that we want to explore in this paper; that is, how affective-discursive dimensions of desire and sexual norms "take residence" in corporeal and social bodies (Ahmed, 2006). To borrow Ahmed's lexicon, what "sticks" to sexuality and to sexual subjects? The term "sticks" here refers to Ahmed's (2004a) conceptualization of affect as that which moves between people, concepts, and objects, with some affects adhering to specific groups of people, concepts, or things. A common example from affect theory scholarship is the way hate or disgust "sticks" to some marginalized groups of people through historical transmission of affects that persistently delimit how some bodies and identities are viewed and treated. For our purposes of addressing sexuality, if we think of sexual meanings, messages, and mandates in a contemporary Western context as running along myriad affective–discursive-semiotic circuits, we want to examine how the "sliding between signs also involves 'sticking' signs to bodies" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 132). This adhesive feature of affects about sexuality is the focus of this article; not as individual pockets of mental states but as the mediated, signified, embodied practices that feminism has long held "experience" to be (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Butler, 2004c; Dunker & Parker, 2009), such that "feelings rehearse associations already in place" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 39). The attention to the social and ideological dimensions of interiority moves the analytic lens away from viewing affect "in terms of inner interior experience, or as an external observable behaviour, but as a *practice*" (Dunker & Parker, 2009, p. 65). Emphasizing the social parameters of affect and its performativity is consistent with a feminist-poststructuralist conception of gender as a repetitive, ritualized, and regulated practice (Butler, 1999a), which can be considered "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004c, p. 1). This scene is ordered by cultural codes that require and regulate gendered coherence. Such coherence is sustained, in turn, by vigilant "gender border control," including the reproduction and re-experiencing of corporeal signs (e.g., gestures, postures, gait) and their adoption as embodied practices that masquerade as developmental inevitabilities (Butler, 1999a, p. 173). Affect theory, as informed by feminist and queer theorizing, is usefully augmented by Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts that center on the instantiation of gender as a symbolic demand that dominates psychic life from the start (Butler, 2004c).

The treatment of affective practice as a collective experience embedded within broader social practices is consistent with Lacanian and, particularly, post-Lacanian feminist formulations of the unconscious as the site of cultural-norm formation, incubation, and transmission (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Among the chief bedrocks of poststructuralist and feminist readings of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that social normativity is both unintelligible outside of sexual difference and that this difference is a fiction precariously and conflictually maintained through psychic and cultural fantasy. This central commitment to analyzing *how* sexually differentiated subjects are produced and the place of the unconscious in this process (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell & Rose, 1982) makes

psychoanalysis an appealing ally for some scholars who meet at the intersection of feminist poststructuralism and affect theorizing (e.g., Ahmed 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Berlant, 2007a, 2007b). Lacan's specification of the gendered subject as a symbolic position presupposes the psychic inscription of sexual difference, which is one way that subjectivity is constituted through the constraints and possibilities of language; that is, the subject is constituted as "sexed" and split by the "wall" of language as a function of the imposition of language, rather than as a biological given. This offers a useful theoretical route to considering the "sticky associations" of sexuality's gendered symbolic architecture, with questions about psychic identifications, representations, allies, and adversaries arising. The notion of gender as a copy of a failed ideal, a fantasy that can never be fully realized and embodied (Butler, 1999a), mobilized, and transmitted along cultural and historical tracks, complements Lacanian and feminist post-Lacanian positing of a subject who sits before the law, negotiating unconscious obligations and demands to inhabit a gender, awaiting recognition through induction into the Symbolic order.

We first plot several intersecting theoretical coordinates, along which sexuality is usefully traced—affect scholarship, Lacanian and post-Lacanian feminist psychoanalysis, and feminist poststructuralism. While we acknowledge the tensions and contradictions among the theoretical threads we draw (e.g., Parker, 2003), our focus is on the productive connections among these. This is followed by two elaborated examples from an ongoing research project on sexual agency and desire among young women, where our analysis traverses these varied but intersecting theoretical frames to examine the ways affective-discursive assemblies that comprise social meanings, rules, symbolic representations, and ideological forces about sexuality find a place to dwell in subjectivities.

Fantasy objects and affective-discursive attachments

Psychoanalysis, with its preoccupation with the disruptive and disorganizing effects of sexuality, bodies, and desire (Malone & Clearly, 2002), is a useful discursive resource for thinking through the protuberances of sexuality. Both Freud and Lacan emphasize the role of unconscious interpretation and cultural impingement in the mandatory, laborious, flawed, and always unfinished project of sexual differentiation (e.g., Freud, 1905; Lacan, 2002). In a feminist synthesis of Lacan and Freud, Mitchell's (2000) summary of this mental representation of social reality—the unconscious figuration—is as follows:

> Understanding the laws of the unconscious [thus] amounts to a start in understanding how ideology functions, how we acquire and live the ideas and laws within which we must exist. A primary aspect of the law is that we live according to our sexed identity, our ever imperfect "masculinity" or "femininity". (p. 403)

The ideological and inescapable imperatives driving sexual differentiation are firmly lodged in the unconscious, rendering psychoanalysis a useful tool for analyzing ideology at work in the unconscious. The unconscious is where body, history, and culture meet psychic interpretations and investments, and it is, thus, through the unconscious that "patriarchal law speaks to and through each person … the reproduction of the ideology of human society is thus assured in the acquisition of the law by each individual"

(Mitchell, 2000, p. 413). For Lacan, the law inscribed in the subject is configured through language acquisition, as the subject is inducted in the Symbolic order.[3] Because the Lacanian subject is forged by the language of the Other—"man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (Lacan, 2002, p. 65)—caught in the chain of signifiers that represent language, society, and culture, sexuality is the site of sociality.

The transcendental signifier in this Symbolic order is the phallus, one of the most contested terms in Lacan and post-Lacanian feminist writing. Often, it denotes patriarchal power and privilege (Buchbinder, 1998; Grosz, 1990, 1994). At other times, it references a "lack in being," a fantasy of cohesion and wholeness, which rests on Lacan's concept of the subject as formed in the space of a radical split (Benjamin, 1985; Mitchell & Rose, 1982). This fissure in subjectivity is inextricably linked to desire, such that desire can only exist as a form of alienation, as we perpetually strive towards attainment of something that was lost at the outset: "the very ideology of oneness and completion, which for Lacan, closes off the gap of human desire" (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 46). Here, the phallus "represents the very notion of exchange itself," such that it is the absence of phallic power that is a central concern for Lacan, as it is essential to the economy of power exchange, as "the absent object of exchange … the phallus is the very mark of human desire; it is the expression of the wish for what is absent" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 395). This formulation of phallic power is less about male privilege than about the contradictory and precarious position of subjectivity and sexuality, which are navigated through (unconscious) desire (Mitchell & Rose, 1982).

While both women and men are precariously and fictively sustained in language, women's position is "fundamentally conflictual" (Lacan, as cited in Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 45); the category of woman is always a contradiction, because phallic order "poses her as exclusion" (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 49): "That the woman should be inscribed in an order of exchange of which she is the object, is what makes for the fundamentally conflictual … character of her position: the symbolic order literally submits her" (Lacan, as cited in Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 45). Woman's subjection in the phallic order that structures patriarchal society is enduring, if not inevitable. Lacan was insistent that it is

> not that anatomical difference *is* sexual difference (the one as strictly deducible from the other), but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be … The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value. (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 42)

Early psychosexual complexity is thus glossed over by a "crude opposition in which that very complexity is refused or repressed" (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 42). Despite Lacan's claims that anatomical sexual difference is a proxy for the relation of the subject to the phallus (Mitchell & Rose, 1982), some feminists have argued that this disconnection of the penis from the phallus is unsustainable in the context of male dominance: "If there is no penile reference to the phallus, it cannot serve as a theory of sexual difference, nor indeed of desire, at all" (Segal, 1994, p. 135). It is only by exposing the arbitrary but nonetheless obligatory and inadequate connection between penile potency and phallic power that a fruitful deconstruction of hegemonic gender structures can occur (Potts,

2002b; Segal, 1994). A potential conceptual rapprochement may be that to the extent that sexual difference is a necessary fiction that upholds kinship rules, hierarchized organization, and social regulation, the phallus stands in for both this capricious and unavoidable difference and for patriarchal power and privilege, with penile potency represented as "that to which value accrues" (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 43). But because the phallus can only ever function as veiled, as that which operates over a perpetual absence, it imbues the originary relation to the first Other's desire with sexual meaning (K. Malone, personal communication, July 24, 2014). In our later analysis section, given our participants' specific and insistent usage of phallic power, we want to retain both meanings of the phallus: as male power and privilege, represented by the penis, in so far as it is positioned as synechdochic with the man (Potts, 2002b) and as alienated desire for completion and the fantasy that one can have what one wants (for them, either being a man or being like a man). In all cases, what is at stake is sexual and social power:

> Whatever its origins, the fact that power connects all sources of itself, acts as a sort of solvent to render invisible all those sources of power. In this way, biology, cultural symbol and social conditions become woven into a complex structure which confers power on men. (Buchbinder, 1998, p. 51)

If sexuality is "a sock drawer for the anxious affects … a gesture cluster that can be organized in an identity for the purpose of passing through normative sociality" (Berlant, 2007b, p. 435), then "attachments to normativity" (p. 435) are central to questions about sexuality. And such phantasmatic attachments pass through ingested and disavowed representations, messages, and norms as sexual sociality takes shape. A unifying feature of psychoanalytic theorizing is its concern with conflict, with a particular emphasis on negotiating desire and demand, for Lacan (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell & Rose, 1982), as subjects attempt to recuperate archaic loss as loss itself:

> When the subject addresses its demand outside itself to another, this other becomes the fantasied place of just such a knowledge or certainty. Lacan calls this the Other—the site of language to which the speaking subject necessarily refers. The Other appears to hold the "truth" of the subject and the power to make good its loss. But this is the ultimate fantasy. (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 32)

Considering fantasy as the site where affective loadings accumulate, as semiotic possibilities form attachments, recalls Lacan's figuration of fantasy as "describe[ing] how we are inhabited by the dimension of the Other even ostensibly at the most private levels of the subject" (Watson, 2009, p. 137). As Watson explains, "Lacanian psychoanalysis posits the field of sexuality as extending far beyond sex, deducing instead a field of sexuality infused by the Other such that we are neither fully defined by our erotic relations nor are they entirely personal" (2009, p. 115). He extends sexuality far beyond nature and bodies on the one hand, and the social and norms, on the other. Lacan's sexual orbit does include bodily and social limits, but also moves into the semiotic universe of symbols, the imaginary, signification, and identification. As the modern sociosymbolic universe becomes increasingly saturated with sexuality (Watson, 2009), with several interrelated

sexuo-social shifts occurring—collectively termed the "sexualisation of culture" (Attwood, 2006, 2009)—Lacan has much to contribute as the quintessential "practitioner of the symbolic" (Watson, 2009, p. 114).

For Lacan, desire as an effect of signification is unconscious at its core; a fugitive form, characterized by tenuousness, transience, and persistent elusiveness in attempts at realization: "it is as a derivation of the signifying chain that the channel of desire flows" (Lacan, 1958, p. 259). Desire is marked by a perpetual lack, a *manqué-a-être* or lack-in-being, as the subject grasps to graft onto language the opaque desire of the Other. Forging its fragmentation, while grasping at coherence, desire is consigned to a perpetual state of absence and longing:

> And the enigmas that desire—with its frenzy mimicking the gulf of the infinite and the secret collusion whereby it envelops the pleasure of knowing and of dominating in jouissance—poses … are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*. (Lacan, 2002, p. 158)

In the recourse to language to access desire, the subject is further removed from desire, but this symbolic system—which "envelop[s] the life of man with a network so total that they join together those who are going to engender him 'by bone and flesh' before he comes into world" (Lacan, 2002, p. 67)—is the only route to desire which poses a fundamental and irresolvable dilemma: "you are yourself betrayed in that your desire has slept with the signifier" (Lacan, 1958, p. 6). Desire resides within the confines of interdiction, as both its founding and its inhibition, ensuring that desire always encounters its boundary: "Desire, more than any other point in the range of human possibility, meets its limit somewhere" (Lacan, 1977, p. 31). The precarious persistence of desire functions to sustain the subject, who: "would be annihilated, if desire did not preserve his part in the interferences and pulsations that the cycles of language cause to converge on him, when the confusion of tongues intervenes and the orders thwart each other" (Lacan, 2002, p. 67). This survival, however, is destined to be tenuous.

Feminist poststructuralism (Butler, 1993, 1999a, 1999b, 2004c; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987) meets post-Lacanian feminist psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell & Rose, 1982) in a concern with the ideological function of representations, social rules, and the sociosymbolic universe that constitutes the architecture of subjectivity. Both address the precarious and conflictual status of subjectivity and sexuality and the specifically patriarchal basis for gender formation. The concept of phallic signification and women's location as the negatively signified Other in Lacanian and feminist post-Lacanian work is useful in deconstructing how gendered sexual subjects struggle with signs, prohibitions, and norms. However, for Lacan and some feminist post-Lacanians (e.g., Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva), the Symbolic order is posited as universal, thereby gender and sexuality assume a homogenized, sometimes abstracted form, even as they are conceptualized as precarious and fictional. Such theorizations lack historical specificity and political embeddedness, failing to address the myriad cultural investments that sustain a capital of category bifurcations (Sullivan, 2003). Although some argue that this meaning of universal for Lacan simply refers to the fact that all societies have language (K. Malone, personal communication, July 24, 2014), an account of how gender and sexuality are shaped

by a multiplicity of (often competing) cultural discourses is still necessary. Feminist poststructuralism, drawing on Foucault's notion of a dispersal of discourses as shaping subject positions (Foucault, 1972, 1997), admits a conception of multiple and contradictory discourses that anchor gender and sexuality. While Foucault has been criticized for insufficient attention to gender positioning (Grosz, 1994; McNay, 1992), feminist poststructuralists have moved his concepts of discourse and power to exposing dominant meaning systems that shape, (mis)represent, and produce knowledge about women and men that become instantiated as "truth" claims (Potts, 2002b). Both theoretical frames are useful in examining the animation of the political through subjectivity, as ideology is performed through and by individuals (Butler, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Dunker & Parker, 2009; Foucault, 1972), transmitted and transmuted through psychic life, as "domination become[s] woven into the fabric of the self and how desire and domination become intertwined" (Flax, 1990, p. 16).

Where affect theorizing is useful for studying the subject in social research is in the commitments of some its advocates to viewing the affective as inescapably political, historical, and semiotic. Similar to the Foucauldian conceptualization of sexuality as the historical fulcrum where the "stimulation of bodies, the intensifications of pleasures, [and] the incitement to discourse" meet (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 105), some affect scholars are attempting to develop a vocabulary for considering the political life and historicity of affects, with emotions transcending individualized interiority and circulating in social spaces, between social bodies (e.g., Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Cvetkovich, 2007). For our purposes of examining sexual subjectivities in a Western neoliberal, postfeminist context, we find most useful the work of Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2012) as it connects specifically to psychoanalytic foundations. Drawing on the psychoanalytic notion of affect as action, wherein unconscious affect protrudes into consciousness through the movement of acts (e.g., words, behaviors) sustaining its force, albeit in disguised form (Freud, 1964a, 1964b), for Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) feelings manifest as signals of latent, often unacknowledged historical associations. Emotions transcend and pass through individual subjects, rather than being localized in them, sustaining an "affective economy" that relies on "relationships of difference and displacement" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 120), such that emotions operate as social and political capital. As such, affects are not tethered to specific objects or signs, but rather gain their affective loadings from being in circulation. Although they may alight for a time, their potency resides in their movement:

> Psychoanalysis allows us to see that emotionality involves movement or associations whereby "feelings" take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present. (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 120)

Whereas for Freud and Lacan the affective economy is centrally psychic, for Ahmed (2004a), the subject is "simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination" (p. 121), such that "movement between signs does not have its origin in the psyche, but is a trace of how histories remain alive in the present" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 126).

Considering affects as sites of movement, collectivity, and traces of historicity, rather than as privatized interiority allows us to examine the transit of prohibitions, pleasures,

and revulsions, as they follow social and individual bodies (corporeal, but also institutional) through time and space (Ahmed, 2006). It is this mobile and performative feature of affects, its capacity for doing in the moment of feeling, its action orientation (acting on self and on others), that links it to discursive scholarship's (e.g., Parker, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) treatment of talk as always "doing something (e.g., countering, complaining, praising, justifying), and not merely being dumped from memory into talk" (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004, p. 500).[4] In the same way that talk both conveys and constructs intentions and identifications that constitute subjects, affect can be usefully viewed as investments and resistances that configure and communicate features of subjectivity, with unconscious operations, such as fantasy, repression, and disavowal, as hovering in this affective-discursive orbit.

Postfeminism, neoliberalism and symbolic orbits

The modern mediascape is abundantly littered with images of ostensibly "empowered" female sexualities (Douglas, 2010; Levy, 2005). The modern (heterosexual) woman is expected to be permanently sexually prepared, proficient, and practicing (Gurevich, Brown-Bowers, Cosma, Vasilovsky, Leedham, & Cormier, 2015) . Postfeminist models of heterosexual sexual agency exhort women to move from objectification to "subjectification" (Gill, 2003, 2008b; McRobbie, 2008). The perpetually eager (framed as agentic) postfeminist sexual subject (Gill, 2007, 2008b, 2009) is inducted into mandatory self-surveillance through the invocation of choice, mastery, and freedom, as the calling cards of neoliberalism (Giddens,1991,1992;Rose,1996,2000). Regulatory regimes are rebranded as playful practices arising from a range of options. Using the vehicle of individualism, feminist tenets are both deployed and disavowed (McRobbie, 2004), such that sociopolitical analysis is silenced into a sanitized discourse of cheerful choices. The choices are represented as new and improved, while the messages remain conspicuously dated and homogenous. Sexual empowerment with a postfeminist twist requires that women not only maximally display their sexual appeal in both appearance and behavior, but that they are enthusiastic in their approval seeking (Levy, 2005). The most prized commodity is "hotness," and women's primary obligation continues to be to embody, exhibit, and enjoy the commodification of their sexuality, no matter what other attributes they possess (Douglas, 2010; Levy, 2005). An emerging discourse of "sexual entrepreneurship," relying on managerial and scientific concepts, similarly promotes ongoing sexual self-transformation and goal-setting, with sexual experts as key resources (Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b). The framing of relationships as work, the emphasis on understanding and pleasing men, and becoming sexually open, confident, and adventurous are all features of the postfeminist sexual entrepreneurship discourse (Gill, 2009).

The active, inter-corporeal, inter-symbolic framing of affects (Ahmed, 2004b), transmitted "through 'sticky' associations between signs, figures and objects" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 120), is useful for thinking about how sexual ideologies permeate and persist across social and psychic spaces. These semiotic circuits of sexuality (signs that attach to bodies, subjectivities, and spaces) are transmitted through the stickiness of affects, their transferability, and unboundedness. Movement between signs, with the nudge of historical associations, intensifying affect, "as a metonymic and sticky relation between signs"

(Ahmed, 2004a, p. 127; i.e., affect as a joining force that links together signs that represent other closely related signs), such that psychic and semiotic are fused in the materialization of sexual subjects and embodiment (Butler, 1993; i.e., formation of subjects and bodies that socially matter). This materialization operates through "the intensification of feelings," such that "feelings are not about the inside getting out or the inside getting in, but that they 'affect' the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 129). Materialization, in this sense, "*stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface*" (Butler, 1993, p. 9) and functions through identificatory practices, vacillating between appropriation and evacuation—through disavowal, displacement, and so on, because "norms are not static entities, but [are] incorporated and interpreted features of existence that are sustained by the idealizations furnished by fantasy" (Butler, 2004b, p. 264). In other words, fantasy is that which wrestles with how to locate meaning, a sense-making apparatus, through which significance is internalized.

In the remainder of this paper, we want to bring together the theoretical strands discussed above to examine the way discursive-affective striations about sexuality become burrowed in the social skin of psyches and embodied practices, through the tangled assembly of semiotic and unconscious registers. We rely on two examples from a larger project on sexual desire and agency in young Canadian women, exploring how regimes of self-management and the rhetoric of autonomy, choice, and liberation characteristic of postfeminism are deployed to display and displace sexuality (Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma, & Matti, 2015; Gurevich et al., 2015).

Discourse analysis, wherein text is analyzed with an eye for adopted subject positions, is compatible with a Lacanian treatment of language as always positioning subjects (Parker, 2005). This does not mean that discourses

> fully define subject positions, but it is the activity of speaking itself that positions the subject in relation to another … What is being said does not, according to Lacan, lie outside existing chains of signification, but always leads the speaking subject to "lie" inside those chains. This is why Lacan repeatedly argues that "no metalanguage can be spoken" (Lacan, 1977, p. 311), that there is no external point from which it is possible to speak that is not also necessarily implicated in a certain kind of position. (Parker, 2005, p. 174)

Another important implication of discourse analysis informed by a Lacanian lens is that interpretations retain their provisional status even as we draw on unconscious reference points. The referential, rather than originary, is key. As Parker (2005) asserts, in conducting "psychoanalytic discourse analysis we are indeed reproducing and transforming what we name rather than 'discovering' things" (p. 178), making Lacan a potent discourse analytic tool.

Method and analytic approach

We now turn to a small subset of 51 Canadian young women (age range 18–26) to explore how they negotiate the postfeminist "sexual empowerment" imperatives. Over a 3-year period, semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 2.5 hours (range = 1.5–3 hours) were conducted at an Ontario University, following approval by the university

REB, by the first author and three trained Research Assistants. Transcribed, audio-taped material was subjected to a discourse analytic technique. Relying on a view of language as constitutive, discourse analysis focuses on talk as action—as a way of achieving certain goals (e.g., presenting points of view, displaying particular identities, positioning oneself in specific ways), rather than as a transparent reflection of underlying thoughts, feelings and beliefs (Parker, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Thus, the unit of analysis is discourses themselves, rather than putative core features of experience. Discourses are read as actions and interpreted as social practices. In this sense, the analysis of discourse is by definition an analytics of ideology (Parker, 2005). Interpretive repertoires are also used to understand how individual accounts draw on available sociocultural discourses. Interpretive repertoires refer to patterns in the data that transcend individual descriptions as they are linked to social meaning systems (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

Extended analyses of excerpts from two participants are provided to examine how subject positions are worked up in relation to available discourses of gendered sexualities and intrapsychic orbits specific to each participant. This is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the data; the two excerpts reflect key findings based on the larger sample. These show that young Western women are adopting phraseology from both a pornographic lexicon and sexual expert discourses to describe sex and desire, resulting in paradoxical effects. Specifically, maximal sexual exploration is positioned as prized capital, with desire coded as doing; sex is framed as "relationship hygiene," with frequency "dosing" cited as key to maximal relationship health; pornography is both repudiated as unrealistic and used prescriptively to inform sexual practices; and female sexual agency is both required and repudiated (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gurevich et al., 2015). While drawing on Lacanian and post-Lacanian feminist psychoanalytic and affect theory, the analysis will remain primarily at the level of discourse. We pursue several analytic routes, as informed by Lacanian affect and feminist poststructuralist theorizing. Specifically, we examine the subject positions taken up by participants, as inflected by affective associations and fantasies, using the following questions as analytic guides: What does the imagined Other want from me? How does the Other imagine me? How is my desire formed (or repressed) by the Other's demand? How does sexual difference, structured by the social, become mapped on to the body? How are sexual norms ruptured and reinscribed? What are the psychic costs of attachments to normativity? How does woman's lack in the Symbolic order organize sexual prohibitions and possibilities?

The Lacanian route draws on the notion of desire as a wish "to have one's desire recognized … a yearning for recognition" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 396), such that recognition is central to the formation of one's desire and sense of identity (Lacan, 2002; Mitchell, 2000; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009). Affect theory permits an exploration of what adheres to sexual subjectivity, as affect moves along social circuits, through embodied responses that are yoked to differential access to sexual power and privilege (Hemmings, 2005). In the narratives that follow, we will see that affects are not random, interior experiences, but are rather forms of embodiment saturated with specific messages about sexual possibilities and prohibitions. In so far as such meanings and norms are created in the context of patriarchal social and sexual relations, affects carry the weight of such discrepant possibilities for desire, agency, and pleasure. Thus, we will see how affects are attached to sexuality as defined by phallic power. Because Lacanian psychoanalysis

examines how social reality (i.e., patriarchy, kinship systems, hierarchical organizations) is represented in mental experiences (i.e., fantasy; Mitchell, 2000), these women's accounts point to the continuing embodied legacy of such sexual imbalance of power even in the age of (ostensible) postfeminism.

For example, drawing on Irigaray's notion that women continue to be "entangled in a web of commodification" within the heterosexual marketplace (Fahs, 2011, p. 180), it is useful to consider how women's bodies and sexuality become cultural symbols of value (Fahs, 2011). Cultural expectations that construct and regulate female sexuality and its representation have been shaped by women being bought, sold, and exchanged as gifts between men for much of Western history (Fahs, 2011). This legacy of patriarchal economy continues to pervade female representations, interpersonal interactions, and subjectivities. Within such sociocultural contexts, a woman's own subjective sexual desire and pleasure may be filtered by specific "attachments to normativity" (Berlant, 2007b), such that: "*the pleasure she reports feeling* as a result of her commodification signifies the relentless ability of patriarchy to demand women's compliance with, and submission to, phallic/patriarchal power" (Fahs, 2011, p. 189). If, as Butler (1997) posits, "no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on which he or she is fundamentally dependent (even if that passion is 'negative' in the psychoanalytic sense)" (p. 7), women's subjective sense of sexual power depends upon her being adequately recognized within the laws dictated by the heterosexual marketplace, wherein women "perform their desire for … their subjective possessor" (Fahs, 2011, p. 190).

Thus, in the analyses that follow, we will see how the women invoke the phallus, as the social symbol of patriarchal power and of sexual difference, in working through fantasies of sexual possibilities and prohibitions. Specifically, we rely on feminist Lacanian interpretations that refer to having the phallus, rather than being the phallus. This phallic possession is transformed into a positivity (as against the lack that women represent in language), creating a space in language for what is not there (i.e., women's power and desire). In each narrative, we will see the operations of phallic deference; sometimes the phallus is represented as the penis (in concretized terms as a source of imagined virility), while at other times the phallus (in symbolic terms as a source of imagined power) is represented as the one who can both elicit and experience desire.[5] We will also see their appeals to the grid of sexual commodification (Fahs, 2011) and women as exchange entities in (archaic yet persistent) kinship rituals (Mitchell, 2000) as the defining bedrock of female sexuality. This leads to framing masculinity as superior and enviable, such that adopting the phallic position is viewed as a less conflicted compromise. In the first case, the woman pursues an ambivalent but (forcefully) avowed female sexual conqueror position, as she both dons and denounces her father's position as sexual champion. In the second case, faced with the dilemma of unequal access to sex, the woman achieves conflict resolution by reaching for presumed anatomical "rules," such that the sexual double standard is naturalized.

Practicing pleasures: Contingent agency and ejecting shame

The *practicing pleasures* repertoire refers to the construction of sexual allure and receptivity to a broad spectrum of sexual possibilities as a critical feature of contemporary

sexuality. While there is considerable talk of sexual performance and sexual variety in these accounts, pleasure is more obliquely described in most cases (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gurevich et al., 2015). The young women articulate persistent tensions between sexual agency and desire and the disciplining effects of regulatory norms, which operate within intrapsychic tracks always inflected by gender difference. Registers of shame and anxiety attach to gender-marked bodies and subjectivities. These attachments shape desire and agency around warding off allegations of promiscuity as a key exigency. Pursuit of sexual pleasure and performance alternately appears and recedes. In keeping with the postfeminist ethos of liberation and perpetual sexual preparedness (Gill, 2007, 2008b, 2009; McRobbie, 2004, 2008), choice, individuality, and self-determination are invoked to recast self-regulatory and self-objectification practices as selection from a palate of possible pleasures.

Example 1

The following participant asserts the centrality of sexuality to her sense of herself in statements such as: "It's important to me, I've always been a really, a really sexual person … it's a really big part of my life." The declarations of sexual vibrancy, confidence, and liberation stand alongside a melancholic refrain of being positioned as different, an outsider, and socially maligned. The latter is dropped in as an irrelevant footnote below, but unfolds more fully as the interview proceeds:

> I'm very open about it; I'm wearing this shirt and most people would tell me I should not wear a shirt that looks like this and I specifically put on a tan-colored bra so that you question is she wearing a top or not, like I like throw people off with stuff like that. I will show my cleavage, I will be sexy if I want to be sexy and still cover myself up if I want to cover myself up, you know I just wear what I feel like wearing, I do what I feel like doing and you know often I'll get "Wow you're asking for it, you're asking for it" and I was like "No, I don't ask for anything," if that idea runs through your mind or the feeling like you think you can grab my arm and pull me to you and try to talk to me, you think you can do that, that's all you, that's all you and I'm not asking for anything, like I can give two shits about what anyone thinks about me and it's always been that way because I've always had people talking. [P41]

Two affective strands run through this excerpt; those attached to the subject position she adopts (as rebel, sexual provocateur, victim of accusations/unwanted actions) and those attached to an imagined gaze (potential admirers, bystander critics, social order). As rebel, the affect moves between pride and provocation; as sexual provocateur, it moves between defiance and indifference; as victim of accusations/actions, the affect is suspended between defiance and resignation. The imagined potential admirers are positioned as experiencing a mixture of titillation and confusion, bystander critics as projecting danger warnings, and the social order is rife with victimization and accusation.

Considerable defiant energy is expended on negating a concern with what others think ("I can give two shits about what anyone thinks about me"), while exhibiting a thorough preoccupation with the disciplinary gaze ("I like throw people off"), attributed to a personal history of being (mis)judged ("it's always been that way because I've always had

people talking"). A scopic presence is alternately imagined, desired, and derided, but impossible to ignore. Being noticed and recognized as sexually desirable is a distinct want, accompanied by the cost of condemnation. Her "specular image," dependent upon a "dialectical identification with the other" (Lacan, 2002, p. 4), is embedded in a semiotic circuit of simultaneous sexual visibility and invisibility. She wants to be noticeably, perceptibly sexual and desirable, while also wanting to control how the sexual signs are read, imagining she can order (and disorder) the terms of sexual visibility. Fantasies about the desires of imagined others abound—those who are enticed ("I will show my cleavage, I will be sexy"), those who judge her ("most people would tell me I should not wear a shirt that looks like this"), those who misunderstand her ("no, I don't ask for anything") or even those who could harm her ("like you think you can grab my arm and pull me to you"). In orienting towards the Other's desire, experienced as inaccessible but substantivizing, anxiety about the flimsy nature of self is warded off. As Vanheule and Verhaeghe (2009) explain, "knowledge of what the other desires and likes in me works as an anxiolytic agent: if one feels confident that the other's desire is organized by specific characteristics of oneself, this desire loses its threatening qualities" (p. 398).

In waging a battle against the transcendental signifier—the phallic guarantor of patriarchal power and control, referenced as sexual victimization here—she imagines herself as winning ("you think you can do that, that's all you, that's all you and I'm not asking for anything"). Mutual recognition, as the substrate for desire (Mitchell, 2000; Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009), remains elusive here. Entrenched as she is in the gender masquerade, it is unclear if the phallic position is resisted or reinforced. At the same time, constructing herself as an object of permanent surveillance, alternating between admiration and abjection, she is simultaneously caught up in a symbolic system where sexual difference is both inescapable and comes with a price. Woman's synecdochic position as lack (Mitchell & Rose, 1982) permeates this young woman's fantasies of temptation, titillation, and terror. Proclaiming pride in flouting conventions about proper feminine conduct, she positions herself outside the symbolic order of propriety, even as she is caught up in the signifying system that yokes femininity to sexual availability and vulnerability. Individual choice, freedom from social strictures, and the right to be viewed as sexually desirable are framed as key mandates, while the obligatory postfeminist dictates of maximal sexual exhibition are elided. The affective economy (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b) that "sticks" the sign of woman to both mandated sexual display and social derision adheres, as she attempts to evacuate shame, ambivalence, and anxiety transforming this collectivity into cavalier indifference.

Her desire to provoke and entice—whether it be in dress or in alternately donning and denouncing the ascriptions of others—is an attempt to loosen this accusatory adherence, while reinscribing its hold. In the phantasmatic sexual duel above ("if that idea runs through your mind"), it remains somewhat unclear if the intentions of the Other are welcome or aversive, but she is adamant that they are unsolicited by her. She holds fast to this disavowal even as she claims that wearing certain attire is done "specifically" to raise certain "questions." The identificatory positions here are multiple, fragmented, and dissembled, with identification dispersed among multiple sites (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967), such that "fantasizing recasts that Other within the orbit of [her] scene" (Butler, 2004a, p. 189). Imagining reactions she may invite, even as she rails against the sign of

the provocateur, the assembly of subject positions in her scene are manifold—jury, predator, sexual conquest, and bystanders.

The language of choice and disregard for rules also gestures towards her special status as an outsider. Here, she emphasizes her exemption from heteronormative injunctions by drawing attention to her equal capacity for capturing the interest of girls:

> I'm a huge flirt, massive flirt … I guess I get the attraction back more often than not, I have no shame, like you know, flirting and being sexy, you know, everyone has their own definition of what sexy is though. And I've learned how to tailor it to people, I know how to be generally sexy with guys and I know how to be generally sexy with girls. [P41]

Standing outside the confines of social conventions raises the specter of shame, added as a barely perceptible postscript above. Shame, as a condition of being exposed, is a recurring theme for this participant—experiencing it, rejecting it, warding it off, and disavowing its presence. In the context of a culture that highly prizes sexual mastery, agency is yoked to a specific form of sexually proficient femininity. She carves out a particular path for the trajectory of this shame (that she deliberately ejects) below, linking it to the absence of a father figure, early and consistent attention from boys (and girls), and the social castigation engendered by this attention:

> In grade 7 and 8, guys liked me and I never grew up with a father, so I was always like, boys accepting me, men, subconsciously probably like my father right you know, accepting me so I dated a lot of boys, I think I made out with them at most but of course, 12, 13 year old boys will say whatever the heck they can so I was a slut in grade 7 and 8, you know and that defined me a lot at that time and I've always been the kind of person that you know what, you want to say some shit about me, I will be exactly what you want me to be, you know, I will be that, because what's the point in trying to fight it. So it's always been something that's predominant in my life, I've always had attention from boys and I've often times had attention from girls too so it's a lot of who I am. I don't know if that's a good thing but, I think it's who I am … [P41]

Despite the many avowals of autonomy in the conduct of her sexual life, she frames her identity as being determined by the sexual allegations of others, allegations she simultaneously rejects and ingests as her founding ("that defined me a lot at that time and I've always been the kind of person that you know what, you want to say some shit about me, I will be exactly what you want me to be"). The adoption of the accusation as her own self-ascription is both a form of resistance to a social order that is sexually negotiated through the phallic fantasy of potency, where women are cast as fantasy screens for debasement, and a repetition of the phallic order. The excessive mimesis, wherein the woman takes up the phallic tools (Egan, 2003), attempting to "show the gaps and the wholes in its structure" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 131) is a striving to move from being merely positioned as object to using her object status to rupture the phallocentric fantasy of virtuous as distinct from vamp. Becoming that for which she is blamed is fraught; there is a triumphant defiance (i.e., you think you know me, but you only see what I deliberately manufacture) and a weary compliance (i.e., it's easier to be who you think me to be, than to refute your version of me). The desire of the subject is entangled with the desire of the Other, which is to say the demand of the Other (Weatherill, 2009). In forging her sense

of self, this young woman is deeply immersed in the quintessential Lacanian question: "What does [the Other] want from me?" (Lacan, 2002, p. 300). Her response can be read as a defensive compromise position: I will be exactly who you want me to be, but this being is of your own making, so I am innocent. Thus, a compliance and a confrontation is simultaneously enacted. She is accused, she acquiesces, and she is absolved.

A yearning to be noticed, to be recognized, also permeates these accounts, with the longing located in a psychodynamic discourse of compensation for a father's absence ("I never grew up with a father, so I was always like, boys accepting me, men, subconsciously probably like my father"). The response to the loss is a mixture of melancholic resignation ("what's the point in trying to fight it") and ambivalent acceptance ("I don't know if that's a good thing but, I think it's who I am"). The longing to be seen manifests in a persistent "appetitive ambivalence" (Berlant, 2007b, p. 439). Starving for attention (Berlant, 2007b), being noticed—even while shamed for being a "slut"—is a way to sustain her "ideal-I," her "assumed image" (both as in adopted and as in ascribed; Lacan, 2002; "I've always had attention from boys and I've often times had attention from girls too so it's a lot of who I am"). The shame of alleged promiscuity is evacuated by minimizing the sexual acts ("I think I made out with them at most"). Making out with a lot of boys is a less significant transgression than having sex with a lot of boys; even as the sexual rules are ridiculed, they are recapitulated.

In the following elaboration of eliciting sexual attraction from both men and women, her desire figures alternately as playful ("I just have fun with it") and as constricted by past allegiances and absences ("probably stems from my father too 'cause he cheated on my mom"):

> That's a lot of how I handle my interactions and I see the responses that I get and you know, it's not like I'm legitimately going out there trying to be a sexy person but I just have fun with it, I like seeing guys in vulnerable situations and I like the look on a girl's face when she's feeling like she's being made to feel pretty, you know … I do have more trust in females than I do with males though, I always have. And that probably stems from my father too 'cause he cheated on my mom and that's how they ended up splitting; I have a general distrust when it comes to guys and I just sort of have this caring attitude when it comes to women. [P41]

She misspeaks in her use of "legitimately"; the intended, and more grammatically obvious choice is "deliberately." This slip of the tongue reveals potential ambivalence about her attempts to sexually entice, provoke, and perform. While earlier excerpts reveal numerous manifestations of "trying to be a sexy person," here, she downgrades these deliberate attempts at sexual display as mere play ("I just have fun with it"). The play has a decided purpose: to displace phallocentric discourses of male superiority and power and female lack of privilege in the social order that regulates sexuality. Adopting the phallic position of provocateur and pursuer (while resisting the traditional role of female seductress), permits her to transfer phallic power to women, herself included ("I like seeing guys in vulnerable situations and I like the look on a girl's face when she's feeling like she's being made to feel pretty"). She can both hold the position of a desirous subject and elicit recognition from other women who are located as objects of her desire. In this imagined sexual pursuit, men are constructed as exposed, while women are framed as victorious, and as experiencing both desire and desirability. Referencing a lack of trust in

men, located in her father's infidelity, she links this attempt at recalibrating sexual equity to identification with a mother she views as a victim. The assembly of subject positions (victor, victim, betrayer, betrayed) and affective loadings (pleasure, excitement, anxiety, danger) are precariously suspended, as she wrestles with exerting agency in the face of a difficult-to-dislodge psychodynamic history.

The regulatory projection of social norms is inescapable; listing reasons for not having sex points squarely at the pre-loaded affective capital that orients female sexuality: "Sometimes it's because I'm afraid that if I have sex with them too early, they will think less of me. Because regardless, there are those social norms." The "regardless" gestures towards a range of implicit imaginings, desires, and dangers the enduring grip of sexual double standards; the injustice and injury against which she inveighs; the wish that society operated differently; and her reluctant resignation to their self-disciplining force. In titrating her sexual conduct, the prohibitive is inscribed on her body, rendering it "docile" and "disciplined" (Foucault, 1977/1995) despite attempts at defiance.

Example 2

The following is one example of how discourses of sexual difference and differential gendered sexual scripts are transformed into an anatomically based explanatory mechanism, structured by the conjunction of desire, fantasy, and ideology:

> Because a girl is a lot easier to label a slut. I mean a guy if he has a lot of sexual partners like, "Yeah, way to go!" And for a girl it's kind of a bad thing. … The thing is I thought about it in a logical way, I've thought about this before, that why is it that girls are less likely to have sex randomly than guys, although nowadays there are girls who are also having sex randomly, just as guys do. But for me personally, I would think it's because, the penis doesn't actually change no matter how many times you have sex, it's always gonna look the same and be the same. But a girl's vagina, if you have a lot of sex it tends to look different and like you're gonna be really loose or something if you have so many partners … So I guess that's the barrier coz like you actually do change." [P09]

This young woman is both aware of gendered sexual norms and resorts to considerable psychic machinations (more palatably repackaged as logic) to justify the rules in ways that render them natural rather than normalizing. This is the quintessence of subjection (Butler, 1997, 1999b). Questions about unequal access to sexual pleasure arise throughout the interview, as she works to reconcile societal expectations and restrictions with a "personal theory" about what constitutes proper (and even physically healthy) feminine sexual conduct. In this excerpt, the cultural script adheres as an embodied and mandatory restriction, finding relief in an anatomical explanation. In doing so she strategically deploys the discourse of reason ("I thought about it in a logical way"), such that dictates about appropriate femininity morph inconspicuously into corporeal certainty.

The "slut" marker is both a social and anatomical inevitability for this young woman. She holds the lack of parity alongside its recoding as a biological rather than a societal rule ("I mean a guy if he has a lot of sexual partners like, 'Yeah, way to go!' And for a girl it's kind of a bad thing"). There is no place for women who have "a lot of sexual partners" in a Symbolic order structured by sexual difference that relies on

phallic predominance. Women cannot escape castigation and its corollary of shame where biological structures are sutured to social strictures, such that the penis is synecdochic with phallic power (Potts, 2002b): "The symbolic function of the phallus envelops the penis as the tangible sign of a privileged masculinity, thus in effect naturalizing male dominance" (Grosz, 1990, p. 123). For this young woman, male sexual privilege and access to pleasure are quite concretely naturalized: "the penis doesn't actually change no matter how many times you have sex, it's always gonna look the same and be the same." Both the penis and phallic superiority are imaged to be immutable and tied directly to biological givens. Although patriarchal power is not inevitably linked to anatomical structures, its potency relies on "the *production* of a specific form of male sexuality through internalisation of images, representations and signifying practices" (Grosz, 1989, p. 112). For this woman, the semiotic architecture of sexuality is internalized as fixed; the signs of virtuous woman and virile man are ingested as concretized, complementary in relation to each other, and certain. Penises remain static, as men remain powerful, while vaginas are subject to change, as women are subject to recrimination ("but a girl's vagina, if you have a lot of sex it tends to look different and like you're gonna be really loose or something if you have so many partners"). The lingering "or something" betrays some doubt about her theory's precision, while simultaneously cementing her belief in the inevitable morphological cost of having multiple partners.

This young woman struggles to imagine a social order in which sexual equality is possible, even as she acknowledges that some women are transgressing the rules ("although nowadays there are girls who are also having sex randomly, just as guys do"). Moving quickly from the possibility of sexual freedom for women to her own personal theory of why such liberation is restricted: some women *may be* having sex like men, but they will be punished with slack vaginas, which appear as slut invectives. The sociocultural imperative is transformed seamlessly into a corporeal injunction, via the invocation of a discourse of the "loose vagina" (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001).[6] That which is named as "personal" reflections about why women's open access to sexual partners is stigmatized reflects a history of affective "associations already in place" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 39). A loose vagina signifies much—a loose, used, and discarded woman—rendering the woman an object of repulsion, an "abject" threat (Kristeva, 1982) that must be ejected. Social norms operate to direct the scene of abjection, as "a psychic process of enlivening exclusion and domination, but these are always 'tenuous' bids to secure social regulations and normalization" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 234). Shame, repulsion, rejection, fear, and the punishment for appetitive excess all hover in this orbit; the defiled must be displaced. A woman desiring many partners cannot exist without penalty—an assault on desires and deeds of all women ("I guess that's the barrier coz like you actually do change"). The obstacle to women's sexual freedom is framed primarily as an anatomical restriction that is transformed into social restraint. One's own possible desires are an unavoidable casualty in this effort to find consolation for limits imposed on all female sexuality. Women's bodies are constructed as more pliable than men's, rendering them more penetrable by social sanctions. Tethered to the transcendental signifier—phallic potency—this young woman cannot find her way out of the semiotic chain that links penises to power and vaginas to vulnerability.

In the following excerpt, female sexual pleasure is again framed as physically difficult to achieve and concretized as having specific economic consequences:

> Emotionally, personally I like when some effort is put into it. I guess when let's say oral sex is there, not like from his part, if he performs oral sex on me. … So you know, it's not just for him, like he tries to please me, rather than himself. That's like good. It shows that he cares. Or that he wants to please me rather than just himself obviously. And you know, there's some kind of like romantic setting or something, that's sometimes good. Not always coz sometimes you know you want something else, like a crazy night or something. … But it is a lot easier for them [guys] to have sex than for girls. They just put it up and there you go. And it's a lot easier for them to even masturbate you know, it's right there. It's in your face. I mean what else are they gonna do with it?! And for girls you have to pay like $50 for a good vibrator or something. [P09]

The provision of oral sex is symbolic of a partner's real interest with her pleasure, framed as the definitive barometer of his attention and intention. Although there is a quick nod to the requisite "romantic setting," it is quickly displaced by the discursive competitor of the reckless, "crazy" night. Sexual labor is central here—work that she desires to see, work that she alludes to having done ("it's not just for him, like he tries to please me, rather than himself"), work that is evidence "that he cares." A partner motivated to please is positioned as both desirable and not necessarily expected ("I like when some effort is put into it," "It's not just for him"). Elsewhere she refers to turning away from her own desire to avoid making a partner feel inadequate: "I don't want to make them feel bad, like they aren't doing a good job or something." Phallic power is framed as both potent and fragile—men's access to sexual pleasure is seen as easily achieved by virtue of their anatomy ("it is a lot easier for them [guys] to have sex than for girls. They just put it up and there you go"). But this leading role can easily be diminished if their status as "sexperts" (Potts, 2002b) is questioned.

She continues to draw on the "symbolic advantage of male corporeal exteriority" (Potts, 2001, p. 148)—("It's right there. It's in your face")—as part of the demarcation of the inside/outside in hegemonic constructions of sexuality that place female and male sexuality at opposite poles. This deployment of a discourse of the interiorized female sexed body vs. the exteriorized male sexed body serves to position male sexuality as uncomplicated and easily gratified, while female sexuality is elusive and obdurately difficult to satisfy: "men's bodies are equipped with the positive property of exteriority" (Potts, 2002b, p. 195), while women are stuck with vulnerable vessels. This imagined inside/outside genital division becomes attached to fantasies of differential sexual labor, with economic barriers to satisfaction. Women need to spend money to ensure sexual satisfaction ("$50 for a good vibrator"), as well as enlist the special "effort" of partners, as indicated above; men can just effortlessly achieve it ("a lot easier for them to even masturbate").

The political status of the body, as a signifying force, is grafted onto its presumed fleshy ontological status (Grosz, 1994). Men's pleasure is guaranteed ostensibly because penises are easily powered up, while women's pleasure is uncertain because vaginas require extra effort. The historical connection of female sexuality with ambivalence, apprehension, and retribution is rendered invisible in this woman's imaginary, but the

affective loading sticks. The sociohistorical context for considering women's genitals as interior (inverted) forms of male organs (Laqueur, 1990) undergoes swift sublation here, in favor of a logic of biology. While gendered body politics police bodies and embodiment, their regulation is imagined as natural, rational, and justifiable. Impossible demands of differential sexual scripts weigh heavily, but are assiduously kept at bay. The barometer of moral rectitude is permanently set to "on" and measures of proper feminine conduct are rapidly calculated. Anxiety about the conduct of proper femininity is resolved by forgetting (repressing and denying) that "power and gender sex the body" (Bayer & Malone, 1996, p. 673) by branding social significance into flesh. While the possible unconscious motivation for such derivation is multiple and difficult to locate in this delimited context, it is useful to consider how the political is both concealed in and carved into bodies and subjectivity. Bodies inscribed by culture become natural bodies (Grosz, 1994), such that deconstruction of disciplinary regimes are driven underground. Accepting anatomical inevitables may be easier to bear than social demands.

Conclusions

In this article we have provided some examples of how normative injunctions permeate sexual syntax, attempting to move beyond the commonly reported sexual double standard (Allen, 2003; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Raby, 2010) and sexualization of culture (Attwood, 2006, 2009). Specifically, the selected young women's accounts point to the difficulty of negotiating being a valued, sexually desired object and desirous subject, under the precarious conditions of both cultural and psychic investments in desire, wherein subversion of the position of desire is an unavoidable dilemma. In considering the ways in which young women interpret and incorporate messages about bodies, sexuality, and gender norms, we are in agreement with scholars who are skeptical about the benefits of "social psychological 'effects' research with its hypodermic understandings of cultural influence" (Gill, 2008a, p. 434). A simple correspondence model of media images and psychological states is of limited utility. Exploring the instantiation of representations in subjectivity requires a consideration of how ideology functions to constitute subjects not as an intravenous injection of "effects," but rather viewing its operations as indexed by negotiation and resistance (Gill, 2008b). This, in turn, requires an engagement with a number of epistemic and empirical concerns: language as a site of ideological analysis (Parker, 2005), which is the domain of discourse analysis, particularly from a feminist poststructuralist perspective; the transmission of affect along social routes (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b), which is the arena of affect scholarship; and fantasy and unconscious ties to the world of symbolic representation and identification, which is a preoccupation of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2002). Discourse analysis, concerned as it is with how subject positions are adopted within available symbolic and social orbits, is compatible with a Lacanian treatment of language as always positioning subjects (Parker, 2005). A Lacanian reading, while attentive to meaning-making within the unconscious tracks of signifiers that represent language, society, and culture, acknowledges that psychoanalytic interpretations are not useful because they smooth out narrative paths "in which the unconscious is drawn on as an 'explanation,' but rather [they are used] to disrupt sense, to examine the building blocks out of which sense is being produced as a kind

of epiphenomenon" (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 355). Lacan reminds us that the semblance of narrative coherence is superimposed after the fact, while "the constant deferral of meaning" (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 355) is how understanding proceeds. While the "repetition of certain signifiers or metaphorical substitutes in their function as quilting points or master signifiers" may appear to reveal meaning at the point of origin, "the process of anchoring occurs *retroactively*" (Parker, 2005, p. 170). Affect scholarship is, likewise, useful here in emphasizing that subjectivity, even at the level of the most seemingly singular—affect—is anchored to historical transmission of affects that adhere to certain bodies and identities in ways that direct their signification in specific directions (Ahmed, 2000; Hemmings, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Taken together, these theoretical and analytic tools are useful in thinking about what "sticks" to sexual subjectivity in specific cultural moments.

We have attempted to show that in analyzing talk about sexual subjectivity—talk as libidinal codes under assembly—it is useful to consider not only how participants rely on a range of available discourses, but also how unconscious registers activate affective and semiotic circuits in relation to images, norms, and practices. Because the unconscious is where the social and the ideological are at their most animated, the disciplinary force of gender that carves out sexuality contours is embedded, deciphered, and disciplined most tenaciously in fantasy (Butler, 2004b). Fantasy functions as a meaning-making tool that organizes subjectivity, where social bonds and obligations are managed through repression of some desires, identifications, and histories, while foregrounding others. Psychoanalytic theorizing, from its inception, has posited that this work must be done by all human subjects, but that this trajectory is more precarious for women, owing to the social, sexual, and political position of women (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Desiring subjects develop within the context of hierarchized social demands and contradictions, with phallic ideals of sex and power as key organizing registers.

These young women both locate gender as a site of sexual inequity, and at the same time they frequently resort to its disavowal (e.g., as "individuals" they are exempt, or the role of biological "inevitables"). Resistance is both present and precarious, operating as a phantom. Anxiety and shame are palpable in the words and the gaps, but so is the confrontation against the position of victim or dupe. In considering negotiations of desire and agency within a postfeminist landscape, choice and liberation are regularly invoked by young women, while feminist critiques frequently decry a false consciousness. Rather than viewing young women as holding either sexually emancipatory or oppressive positions (McClelland, 2010), a theoretical and empirical space can be made for examining how erotic economies—residing in sociosymbolic, discursive, and unconscious spaces—circulate among subjects, inhabiting subjectivity, with ideological investments as unavoidable but also unpredictable attachments (Gavey, 2012; Jagose, 2010).

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Notes

1. While emotions can certainly be experienced as unexpected, inexplicable, and ineffable such that language fails to capture them, recourse to a division between the extra-discursive and discursively bounded runs against the psychosocial studies project (Frosh, 2003; for empirical examples, see Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2000, 2003; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). If we take seriously the inexorably fused feature of psychic reality, such that "psychic reality is what the subject lives in" (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 354), treating affect as cordoned off from the discursive is epistemically and empirically unsustainable (see Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012, 2013a, 2014, 2013b). Thus, claims about the capacity of affect scholarship to locate the ineffable, the space outside of discourse, to capture "extra-discursive" elements that ostensibly reside past the reach of discursive tools (Massumi, 2002; Sedgwick, 2003; Thrift, 2004, 2008a), "in effect, do stop the clock and start social life running again at the moment of disruption. The discursive and ideological choreographies organizing the 'unnameable' moment are elided—all we have is the hit on the body, the moment of 'being affected,' mysteriously arising" (Wetherell, 2014, p. 143).
2. If we take seriously the notion that "affective registers have to be understood within the context of power geometries" (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 213), we have to contend with the admission that affect cannot be as "autonomous" (Massumi, 2002) or as unmoored from social significance (a "free radical"; Sedgwick, 2003) as some argue. As the histories and presents of racialized bodies—as only one vivid example—remind us, some bodies cannot escape the limits of affect that structure them as signified in very precise directions—bodies that engender fear, disgust, or hate are specified with little room for affective freedom (Ahmed, 2000; Hemmings, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006).
3. Lacan's subject is constituted in the interplay of the intrapsychic triptych—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Parker, 2005). The trio represents psychic levels that organize subjectivity; a sense of self is continually negotiated within these psychic spaces, with both the hope for and illusion of cohesion alternating with the experience and terror of fragmentation. The Imaginary can be conceived as the internalized representation of the self as whole and coherent, signifying a ceaseless grasping towards unity, in attempts to forestall a sense of fragmentation. The Symbolic is the linguistically ordered social codes that organize the subject and bring the subject into being. These are the rules that form the subject and provide points of access, if only partial, to the unconscious. Psychic organization is thus shaped by and through language as a pre-existing order, providing the conditions for the subject's being. The Real is that which defies representation; it is neither imaginary nor symbolic. Symbolization leads to a loss that locates the Real. These three domains in which various aspects of subjectivity reside position the subject as irreducible to inside and outside factions. The unconscious mobilizes the subject, with these mobilizing forces remaining obscured, manifesting only as gaps, absences, interruptions, and unintended "mistakes"—often found in speech—that signal the work of the unconscious. There is an imaginary phallus and a symbolic one in Lacan, but that distinction does not fall within the horizon of this paper.
4. The broad assembly of approaches described as "discursive psychology" (DP; Edwards & Potter, 1992) includes both those infused with poststructuralist theorizing (e.g., Burman & Parker, 1993; Gavey, 1989; Parker, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and those that fall under

the more general category of social constructionism (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

5. We are grateful to Dr. Kareen Malone, Associate Editor for *Theory & Psychology*, for generously pointing us towards this helpful elaboration of the phallic position.
6. Although this participant frames her ideas about gendered polarities as personal theory, derived from first principles, she is drawing on sociocultural constructions of female bodies as "naturally" interiorized territories (McDougall, 2004; Potts, 2002a) that may be entered by and serve to contain other objects (e.g., tampons, penises) and, are thus alterable (e.g., Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Haraway, 1999). These constructions also specify desirable vaginal size, which cannot also be separated from notions about desirable female sexuality. The valorization of vaginal "tightness" stands in stark opposition to the vilification of vaginal "looseness" in cultural representations of the "perfect" female genitalia (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). Apart from the presumed reduced sexual satisfaction for men, this "slackness" of the material tissue is equated with lax morals: a loose vagina signals a promiscuous woman. The current timing of this participant's similar construction is worth considering in light of the recent rise in cosmetic genital surgery in the West (Braun, 2005, 2009, 2010). Genital alterations include a range of activities, such as labioplasty (labia minora reductions), labia majora augmentations, vaginal tightening, and hymen reconstruction (virginity reinstatement).

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