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ARTICLE

Sexual Fluency: Embedded Imaginaries and Unjust Sex

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that the pervasive reality of unjust heterosex necessitates greater attention to the concept of "sexual fluency" (Cahill 2014). This paper elaborates on what it means to be a sexually fluent and disfluent subject, and its broader ethical and political significance. As part of this discussion, I explore the relationship between sexual (dis)fluency and embedded imaginaries, and critically reflect on the promise and limitations of particular interventions to disrupt patterns of sexual disfluency among sexual actors.

In response to the December 2020 cover of *Vogue* magazine featuring popstar Harry Styles in a ball gown, conservative commentator Candace Owens publicly expressed her concern that "no society … can survive without strong men. The East knows this. In the west, the steady feminization of our men at the same time that Marxism is being taught to our children is not a coincidence. It is an outright attack. Bring back manly men."[1] That Owens mobilizes multiple narratives (national, international, political, and economic narratives) in support of her sexual politics is revealing. In part, it illuminates how gender norms are imbricated with a whole cluster of norms, such that how we collectively imagine and treat sexed bodies has implications for other spheres (e.g., politics, the economy, and international relations). As the above example illustrates, challenges to normative masculinities present a challenge to wider social, economic, and political orders, and can provoke strong affective reactions.

Cultural constructions of sexed identities track subjects through different spheres of activity and affect the respect one accrues not only in the bedroom but across various domains (the classroom, the workplace, the courtroom, and so on). Hence, when feminist theorists seek to address unethical heterosex that is tied to dominant norms of masculinity and femininity, they are not only focused on women's rights to better, more respectful sex with men and its enabling conditions. Rather, they tend to be concerned with women's right to be treated with respect irrespective of the context.

The lack of sexual respect and agency experienced by women in their sexual encounters with men is reflected not only in persistently high rates of sexual assault and rape, but also in sex that is largely considered routine. As Nicola Gavey points out in her pioneering study of heterosex (2005), much of what passes for "normal" and accepted sex between men and women in Western cultures is deeply unethical and unjust. Gavey notes that in many cases, the desires of men alone shape their sexual encounters with women. Women, by contrast, often feel pressured into consenting to sex that they do not desire, and routinely acquiesce to sex acts with men that they do not want or enjoy but do not feel able to refuse. The problem is deepened by the fact that many heterosexual women evince a striking lack of knowledge of what it is that brings them sexual pleasure, or lack the confidence to communicate their preferences to their male partners. This diminished sense of sexual self-confidence and sexual self-knowledge tends to be unequally distributed across the sexes (Rowland 2020).

In her reflections on the pervasive reality of unjust heterosex, Ann Cahill identifies a "culturally imposed sexual disfluency" (2014, 14) among heterosexual subjects. Drawing on Gavey's study, Cahill notes that this disfluency renders men less attuned and responsive to their partner's desires and impairs women's capacity to recognize and articulate their wants and needs. However, Cahill does not unpack the concept of sexual dis/fluency, nor does she outline what kinds of interventions it prescribes. My paper takes up this task and shows how an expanded account of sexual fluency can offer a valuable contribution to a positive sexual ethics that considers what makes sexual interactions both ethically acceptable and conducive to human flourishing.

In pursuing what it means to be sexually fluent or disfluent, and its broader ethical and political significance, my discussion focuses on heterosexual relations. I cannot do justice within the scope of this paper to the distinctive structures and power dynamics that govern other kinds of sexual relations, including same-sex relations. The extent to which the claims made in this paper may apply to different sexual identities and relations remains open to question. Nevertheless, the account of fluency I offer here aspires to be salient and constructive for approaching the ethics of various kinds of sexual encounters.[2] (Furthermore, as later parts of the paper will explain, dismantling the cultural scaffolding for heterosexual disfluency may have positive flow-on effects for the value, meaning, and visibility that is conferred upon non-heterosexual, queer subjectivities.)

In focusing on sexual fluency, this paper seeks to supplement consent-based frameworks for thinking through the ethics of sex, and for guiding interventions to prevent sex that is unethical and unjust.[3] Sexual fluency, as I present it here, is an expansive concept that encompasses themes of sexual self-knowledge, communicative agency, recognition of difference, and sexual self-regard. It also draws into focus the cluster of affective postures, capacities, and virtues that support good sex. Moreover, a fluency-based framework links the problem of disfluency among individuals to wider structural issues through taking stock of embedded and embodied "imaginaries" (Gatens 1996), and the implications of these imaginaries not only for the capacities that sexual fluency relies upon, but also for efforts to disrupt damaging sexual cultures.

Broadly speaking, a sexually fluent subject possesses a capacity to confidently articulate and affirm their desires and preferences, and to understand and appreciate those of their partner. Like linguistic fluency, sexual fluency requires social and institutional support. Among other things, a focus on sexual fluency highlights the importance of there being adequate hermeneutical resources at people's disposal to understand, communicate, and honour a range of desires and preferences that may be non-normative

but which are worthy of recognition. In thinking through sexual fluency and its enabling and disabling conditions, my account centres the concept of the "social imaginary."[4] The social imaginary comprises a materially embedded framework of value and meaning that has its roots in the common stock of images, narratives, metaphors, and other socially shared significations that are particular to a culture (Gatens 1996). These significations form part of the hermeneutical backdrop that structures how individuals make sense of themselves and others as sexual actors, and play a central role in enabling individuals to affectively experience themselves (and others) as sexual actors who merit respect.

This paper connects the problem of sexual disfluency in heterosex to the gap that exists in social imaginaries which shape dominant norms of heterosexual agency. This gap helps to sustain an unequal degree of sexual self-understanding and self-regard among men and women, and is one that women pay for dearly in terms of rape and unjust sex (as well as in other ways). As part of this discussion, I highlight how the embodied and unconscious aspects of social imaginaries, and the sedimentation of damaging imaginaries in institutions of various kinds,[5] poses significant challenges for attempts to cultivate sexual fluency.

Employing the concept of the imaginary to examine the interrelation between cultural significations, affect, and institutions is part of what enables a fluency-based framework to facilitate a deeper understanding of the obstacles as well as the opportunities for encouraging more respectful, fulfilling, and just sex. My discussion of sexual fluency is divided into four parts. I begin by unpacking the concept of sexual fluency in detail, before turning in the second and third parts of the paper to examine disfluency in heterosex and its connection to sedimented imaginaries. In the fourth part of the paper, I analyse the complex process of disrupting imaginaries that prevent sexual actors from communicating and affirming their sexual agency. To conclude, I raise and discuss potential concerns with appealing to sexual fluency as part of developing a positive sexual ethics.

Sexual fluency

"Fluency" (Latin *fluentia*; from *fluere,* "to flow") broadly refers to one's ability to express oneself easily and articulately. The concept of fluency is bound up with notions of fluidity, ease, agility, and habituation, and denotes feelings of confidence and assuredness. To be fluent in a language, for instance, implies that one can understand and express oneself in that language without pronounced hesitation or difficulty. A highly fluent speaker typically evinces a capacity to pick up on subtle cues and nuances in others' speech, and a capacity to readily adapt to new dialogues and conversations. In this sense, fluency is supported by one's capacities for imagination, perception, and feeling as well as one's cognitive capacities.[6]

By analogy, sexual fluency refers to one's ability to express one's desires and preferences easily and articulately, and to understand and appreciate those of one's partner. Someone who is sexually disfluent may be impaired in their capacity to recognize, articulate, and honour their own desires and preferences, or to be appropriately attuned and responsive to those of others—or they may be impaired in both respects, to varying degrees.[7]

In this regard, sexual fluency is both an epistemic and an ethical capacity. It involves understanding what are the sexual needs and wants of one's partner, and adopting an appropriately responsive stance to these needs and wants as well as towards one's own. Like linguistic fluency, sexual fluency is developed through experience and practice over

time and draws on a cluster of interwoven attitudes and dispositions, including self-confidence, concern, curiosity, respect, and openness to learning. These attitudes and dispositions are temporally and socially extended, and shape the ethical quality of any given sexual encounter in significant ways.

Thus, sexual fluency is not simply a matter of knowing or being aware of others' sexual experiences, needs, and preferences: it also relies on cultivating embodied, affective postures that can enable one to respond ethically and responsibly to these experiences, needs, and preferences. (This process of cultivation is both an individual and collective endeavor, as I will explain.)

The implications of being sexually fluent (or disfluent) are not confined to the private sphere; as the following discussion elaborates, sexual fluency is deeply tied to one's ability to meaningfully participate in social and political life. Neither is sexual fluency an entirely idiosyncratic, individual phenomenon: as noted earlier, it can have collective and political aspects, with sexual disfluency tending to be unevenly distributed across lines of gender (as well as other markers of social difference). The ramifications of sexual disfluency, and the costs incurred by individuals who attempt to remedy this disfluency, also tend to vary according to one's social positioning.

My conception of a sexually fluent subject is not akin to the traditional liberal actor who displays full cognitive and verbal competence at all times and across all contexts, and who is entirely self-transparent, fully informed, and self-sufficient. It recognizes that sexual fluency, like linguistic fluency, comes in degrees and can wax and wane across different contexts. Moreover, developing one's capacities for fluency requires individual effort as well as social and structural support. Just as linguistic fluency requires that the language in question exists and is in circulation, sexual fluency depends in part upon the availability of shared resources through which to make sense of oneself and others as sexual actors. This is because none of our lived experiences are immediate; they are always filtered through and mediated by the schemas and frameworks that we have at our disposal, which are "by nature collective" (Pohlhaus 2012, 716). Individuals cannot simply design and employ their own language if they are to be understood by others in their wider community. They must draw on the available pool of communal epistemic resources (Pohlhaus 2012, 718).

As theorists of epistemic injustice have highlighted, a yawning gap exists in the collective resources through which men and women make sense of themselves as social actors (e.g., Fricker 2007). Among other things, this helps to establish and sustain gendered asymmetries of sexual self-knowledge and self-regard. This gap can be explained in terms of structural power imbalances that enable some social actors greater authority than others in shaping communal interpretative frameworks (Fricker 2007, 149–54).[8] The shared hermeneutical resources through which individuals make sense of themselves and their lived experiences comprise conceptual frameworks as well as clusters of socially shared, affect-laden significations (e.g., narratives, images, tropes, symbols, and metaphors) that ground the "social imaginary" of a culture. As Moira Gatens notes, the social imaginary is a "plural" phenomenon, consisting of sexual, racial, national, political, and other imaginaries that vary historically and contextually, and which interpenetrate (2004, 282). Social imaginaries constitute a permanent and tacit backdrop against and through which entire communities make sense of sexed and other social bodies, and which shape collective perceptions of which behaviors are normal, acceptable, and legitimate, and for whom (Gatens 1996, viii; also Gatens 2004, 282). The evocative stories, images, and metaphors that imbue men's and women's bodies and desires with differential visibility, meaning, and significance serve to

condition prevailing norms of gendered conduct. Pervasive tropes in Western sexual imaginaries of "soft," penetrable women and "hard," impenetrable men, and narrations of women as too shy or modest to articulate their desire for rough sex, are among the cluster of significations that give rise to relatively stable patterns of gendered behavior and gendered practices, which accrue legitimacy in virtue of being widespread (and in virtue of being institutionally supported, as I will come to explain). As the following discussion elaborates, in contexts where women and other marginalized social actors are persistently denied a substantive role in shaping collective hermeneutical resources vis à vis sexuality, including prevailing sexual imaginaries, the impact on sexual fluency can be profound (and profoundly unequal). For example, in a cultural context that sidelines women's sexual pleasure, and which encourages women to demonstrate their empowerment through being sexually available and open to rough sex, a woman may be prevented from grasping and affirming her desire not to have (rough) sex as legitimate, and from experiencing her aversion as fitting as opposed to being a sign of sexual repression or prudishness. Against the backdrop of a sexual imaginary that positions men as being entitled to sexual satisfaction, and which encourages indifference to (and contempt for) women's pleasure and needs, men may exhibit diminished curiosity and responsiveness to their partner's desires, particularly when these desires depart from dominant sexual norms. In this sense, the narratives, images, myths, and other widely shared significations that circulate within a given culture are not reducible to mere fantasy or folklore. Conceiving of them in these terms risks trivializing their capacity to shape prevailing social meanings, values, and norms, and to sustain patterns of human sociability across time (Gatens 2004, 282).

By appealing directly to the imagination, the significations that comprise any given imaginary are deeply tied to affect (Gatens 2004, 283).[9] Social imaginaries structure affectively loaded perceptions of certain bodies as desirable or undesirable; hard or soft; as penetrable or impenetrable (and so on); and establish a sense of community around shared attitudes and postures. The affective relations and practices that are shaped by social imaginaries work to enable or constrain the agency of different social actors—often in ways that are hard for such actors to control or correct for (Celermajer et. al 2019). Sexual imaginaries work to elicit strong affective investments in normative masculinities and femininities, and establish affective allegiances around these identities. As Bonnie Mann notes, "extremely personal, viscerally lived identity commitments" are linked to a social imaginary that acts "as a theatre" for strong affects like pride and shame (2014, 100; see also Gatens 2004, 283). The intertwinement of social imaginaries, imagination, affect, and social norms helps to explain why disavowing authoritative sexual norms often induces feelings of doubt, shame, embarrassment, and fear in those who transgress them, and can invite rejection and contempt from the social communities that are established around these norms. The affective purchase of social imaginaries may continue to influence one's behavior even when one does not reflectively endorse the imaginaries in question, and may do so in ways that evade one's conscious awareness.[10]

The power of social imaginaries to shape how individuals cognitively and affectively orient themselves towards their sexual agency and that of others renders them fundamental to sexual fluency. The capacity of dominant heterosexual imaginaries to structure and sustain patterns of sexual disfluency among different social actors is enhanced by their sedimentation in various social institutions––among them, institutions of law, media, medicine, and education. Institutions of this kind condition how people imagine the world and each other, and play a key role in shaping and sustaining normative

behaviors and social arrangements that become so entrenched as to appear natural—"as just the way things are"—as opposed to being seen as socially constructed and contingent (Gatens and Mackinnon 1998, 3). As later sections of this paper elaborate, the institutional reinforcement of damaging sexual imaginaries and affective investments therein deeply complicates efforts to reform unjust sexual cultures.

"Gray area" encounters

Nicola Gavey's extensive empirical research on sexual relations between men and women in the Australasian context is illuminating on several levels. Gavey's central findings, published in 2005, revealed a vast "complex gray area" (136) between sexual encounters that are wholly consensual and ethical, and sexual encounters that are wholly non-consensual and criminal. This "gray area" comprised circumstances under which a man pressured his female partner into sex without using "actual or threatened physical force, but which the woman felt unable to resist" (136). It also comprised instances where a man was "rough and brutish, and the woman described letting sex happen because she felt unable to stop it" (136). As one woman reported, she "more or less consented" to a violent sexual encounter because she "acquiesced" in her actions: "I didn't say 'oh, okay', *I just let him get on with it*" (159; emphasis mine). Notably, Gavey's research also uncovered numerous encounters "where a male partner was not directly coercive at all, but where the woman nevertheless found herself going along with sex that was neither desired nor enjoyed because *she did not feel it was her right to stop it or because she did not know how to refuse*" (136; emphasis mine). This felt obligation to engage in unwanted sex was particularly pronounced among women in ongoing relationships (139–42).

Feelings of uneasiness, confusion, uncertainty, passivity, and resignation are among those affects that permeate the testimony of Gavey's participants. As one participant, "Chloe," reflects:

> when I used to stay the night a couple of times a week, he'd always wanted to have sexual intercourse in the morning and that was just, *that was just how it was* […] And I never really enjoyed sex. And I mean I just thought, you know, like I didn't even question it […] There was *so much taking the cue from the guy*. There was, I don't know how, I guess *I just wasn't tuned into my own feelings* […] or I couldn't have gone through with it. Because, you know, that person wanted me, and I was in a relationship, we were going out together and, *isn't this what everybody does*? And, you know, all that sort of stuff. Most unpleasant. (140; emphasis mine)

"I just wasn't tuned into my own feelings," "I just let him get on with it," "Isn't this what everybody does?": these postures are at odds with those that mark out the sexually fluent subject. Instead of sexual self-awareness and self-respect, a diminished sense of sexual self-regard tends to prevail among the women concerned.

Numerous studies conducted over the past two decades confirm Gavey's findings of a common lack of sexual self-regard among heterosexual women, and their overriding concern with satisfying the perceived needs and wants of their male partners—in the absence of reciprocal consideration (e.g., Rowland 2020; Burkett and Hamilton 2012). The below testimony captures a common experience for women in their sexual relations with men:

> I think the pressures are there to please him … you think oh no he's seriously aroused so I've got to please him in some sort of way I can't just leave him like

> this … in some situations I feel bad because I might not be really into it but he might be sexually aroused. I'm just like okay I guess I can just do it. ("Melanie," qtd. Burkett and Hamilton 2012, 826)

Repeated acquiescence to undesired, unpleasant, non-reciprocal sex can have cumulative effects on women that are far from trivial. Given that one's body constitutes the very ground of one's being and is the fundamental base from which one must act, if a woman's relation to her own bodily desires and pleasures is called into question, then it can affect her lived experience of everything.[11] As Robin West notes, if unwanted, non-reciprocal, and unpleasant sex becomes a "way of life," it may sediment a woman's acceptance that her "own pleasures and pains will not determine her choices or her actions," thus undermining her autonomy and her ability to participate in social and political life on her own terms (2009, 238). Perhaps one of the most troubling implications of unjust sex is revealed by Gavey's study, which found that some women had become so alienated from their own desires and pleasures that it was hard for them to recognize when they had been raped or sexually assaulted. The problems outlined above are compounded by the fact that many heterosexual women lack knowledge of what it is that brings them sexual pleasure. In her studies of the "pleasure gap" between men and women, Katherine Rowland notes that many of the women she surveyed spent their lives without any sense of what they enjoyed or wanted, and tended to unreflectively mimic dominant cultural portrayals of heterosex. As one of Rowland's participants reflected, "We did the sex the way I thought it was supposed to look, but I don't know how much I was really able to understand and articulate what I wanted" (2020, 215).

If sexual disfluency is common among heterosexual women, it also appears as common among heterosexual men. Recall that sexual disfluency is marked by an impaired capacity to recognize, articulate, and honor one's own desires and preferences, or to be appropriately attuned and responsive to those of others (or, one may be impaired in both of these respects, to varying degrees). Whilst the women surveyed above find it disproportionately difficult to confidently articulate, assert, and honor their desires, and to demand that these desires be recognized and respected by their male partners, the latter appear to exhibit postures of assertiveness and entitlement with respect to the satisfaction of their sexual needs, and a lack of curiosity, sensitivity, and responsiveness to those of their partners. It is their desires alone which have the ability to instigate and shape the sexual interaction in a "substantive and meaningful" way as it unfolds (Cahill 2014, 304).

The sexual disfluency exhibited by many heterosexual men is strikingly apparent in women's persistent reports of men ignoring their desires not to have sex or to practice safe sex, and of men asserting their right to "finish" (ejaculate) once a sex act has been initiated. It is also apparent in male habits of instigating rough and brutish sex acts in the absence of any explicit invitation from their female partners. Yet problematic forms of heterosex are not always marked by men willfully and indifferently imposing their desires on their partners. In a recent survey on the growing trend of rough sex,[12] especially the practice of choking women during sex, one young man said he had engaged in choking his girlfriend for several years during intercourse "because she likes it." Days later, he contacted the survey's authors again: "I thought about our conversation and asked her about it. She said she doesn't actually like it; she thought I liked it. But the thing is, I don't: I thought it's what she wanted" (qtd. in Moore and Kahn 2019). A dynamic of mutual misunderstanding and miscommunication is apparent here and is partly reflective of what Cahill identifies as an "epistemological challenge" confronting

sexual actors. This challenge involves becoming aware of, and responsive to, the desires of one's partner, as well as recognizing and articulating one's own desires. This challenge is heightened, in her view, owing to the "prevalence of heteronormative, phallocentric sexual norms" (2014, 316). For Cahill, the task is to find ways to break through patterns of "culturally imposed sexual disfluency" among men and women (2014, 316).[13]

Seeking ways to break through patterns of sexual disfluency is aligned with calls from theorists for structural interventions and normative shifts that support "full and healthy" sexual agency among diverse social actors (Kukla 2018, 2021; Gavey 2005, 2018). My account of fluency complements and deepens this scholarship by focusing on the clustered imaginaries that form the backdrop to heterosexual encounters.[14] Among other things, and as I elaborate later, this conceptual lens helps to illuminate the complexity of normative change wrought through challenges to hegemonic imaginaries.

Sexual disfluency and embedded imaginaries

Dominant sexual imaginaries furnish sexual actors with an impoverished set of resources through which to understand, communicate, and assert their agency. One example of a particularly powerful and pervasive narrative is the "male sexual drive discourse" (Hollway 1984), which constructs men's need for sex as both natural and forceful. This narrative is sedimented in and through various institutional practices, including the aggressive pharmaceutical promotion of Viagra for erectile dysfunction. Images and stories of men as aggressively sexual saturate Western popular media and tend to intersect with other institutionally embedded images of the masculine body in ways that encourage a reductive understanding of male heterosexuality. As Deb Waterhouse-Watson notes, football writing and match reporting routinely employ war-like metaphors to describe young male footballers (e.g., as "missiles," "lethal weapons," "young guns"). Such symbolic framings condition a perception of footballers' bodies (and, one might add, the bodies of young men more generally) as "big, tough and indestructible, inherently and legitimately violent" (2009, 117).

Cultural myths of men's invulnerability are often propped up by legal norms, especially legal failures to recognize sexual violence against men (Gavey 2018, 244). Where men's body boundaries are threatened or breached, the law normalizes their entitlement to respond with excessive force. The Homosexual Advance Defence (HAD) comprises one example of a legal strategy, entrenched in case law, that is overlaid on an imaginary of the heterosexual male body as impenetrable; "its integrity being synonymous with the fantasy of its inviolability" (Churcher and Gatens 2019, 156).[15] The HAD has been used in attempts to defend the extreme physical violence of straight men as a response to having experienced a non-violent homosexual advance. As Stephen Tomsen and Thomas Crofts (2012) argue, the HAD implies that men have a natural right to assert their heterosexuality using violent force. This narrative is further reinforced in and through the use of the Rough Sex Defence (RSD) in criminal law proceedings. The RSD enables men who murder or seriously injure women during sex to claim in court that their female partners invited or consented to rough sex.[16] In many cases, the RSD has resulted in lighter sentences, lesser charges, or no prosecution at all for the men concerned. In this regard, the RSD reflects and entrenches a pervasive imaginary that positions women as desiring violent sex and which normalizes men as sexual aggressors. In serving the interests of violent men, the RSD feeds into an affective culture that supports sexual disfluency: namely, by emboldening brutish men to assert their sexual agency whilst constraining women's capacity to do the same.[17]

Images of an active and aggressive male physicality that are evoked through standard practices in law and mainstream media intersect with those embedded in heterosexual pornography. Here it is common for men's bodies to be presented as hard, invulnerable, and impenetrable in contrast to the soft, vulnerable, and multiply penetrable bodies of women.[18] Portrayals of women in porn—especially Black women—as sexually voracious and always open to sex (Miller-Young 2010), or depictions of women as too shy or modest to articulate a desire for sexual degradation, encourages men to presume such desires are present, and to overlook or dismiss signs to the contrary.[19]

The "hard" masculinities promoted in pornographic and sporting imaginaries play out in online forums as well as in public social spaces, where rituals of men joking about sexual assault and bragging about "smashing" and "screwing" women are commonplace (see Churcher and Gatens 2019; Richardson-Self 2021). Such rituals reflect and embed misogynistic imaginaries that breed contempt for women's sexual pleasure and autonomy, and which encourage men to be overwhelmingly concerned with eliciting the approval of other men.

Whilst resisting the pull of dominant sexual imaginaries and undoing habits of sexual disfluency may ultimately lead to better sex for men, the process may induce strong feelings of shame, guilt, and regret, as well as a sense of fear and anxiety that their distinctive needs will no longer be met. They also risk "losing face" in front of other men. In a cultural climate that privileges "hard" masculinities, expressions of male sensitivity and vulnerability are often cast as "weak" and therefore shameful. Fears of being labelled as a "soft cock," "a fag," or a "pussy" create pressure for heterosexual men to engage in hyper-masculine performances, and to initiate and lead sexual encounters (Hyde et al. 2009). Social, cultural, and affective dynamics of this kind serve to discourage men from becoming sexually fluent; that is, from becoming more curious and responsive as sexual partners, and being more honest and open with respect to personal desires and preferences that go against heteronormative expectations.

Being restricted from understanding, honoring, and articulating desires that go against reductive sexual imaginaries can prove burdensome for men. Yet the ramifications of these imaginaries for women can be particularly severe. In place of narratives that would enable women to recognize, express, and affirm a diverse range of sexual desires and preferences (including desires not to have sex), prevailing imaginaries tend to position women as needing to satisfy men's "natural" and "forceful" sexual urges—especially if they want to hold onto desired relationships (Gavey 2005, 139). Such imaginings exist alongside narratives of sexual liberation that position women as emancipated sexual actors but which narrowly encourage women to demonstrate their empowerment by always being "up for sex" (Thompson 2018). At the same time, women continue to confront conservative messaging that encourages them to avoid behaviors that could be perceived as "slutty." These conflicting imaginaries come some way in explaining the cluster of affects—the confusion, uncertainty, guilt, doubt, resignation, and so on—that pervade the testimonies of many women in their sexual encounters with men.

Women also continue to be deprived of resources that might enable them to reach a better understanding and appreciation of their sexual needs. Whilst men's sexual pleasure is aggressively promoted, women's sexuality continues to be side-lined or erased, even within institutions of education. For instance, despite the enormous complexity of the clitoris and its central role in enabling female orgasm, it occupies a subordinate space in teaching curricula in comparison to penile anatomy (Wahlquist 2020). Inertia among institutions of education with respect to expanding collective knowledge of

women's sex and sexual pleasure is paralleled by institutional pushback in response to demands for such institutions to address cultures of sexual assault. Universities are particularly well known for silencing assault victims to avoid reputational damage and financial disinvestments, and for refusing to dismantle misogynistic college fraternities. Thus, the institutional preservation of hermeneutical lacunaes and sedimentation of affects that work against sexual fluency is often accompanied by the institutional production of affects that sustain disfluency (e.g., fear of social and institutional retribution).

Much more could be said about the myriad ways in which institutions function to sediment dominant social imaginaries and affective dynamics that undermine sexual fluency. Nevertheless, what I have presented here aims to be sufficient for appreciating the manner in which hegemonic imaginings and institutions intersect to restrict women's abilities to grasp, articulate, and affirm their bodily pleasures, their desires, and their entitlements as sexual actors. Within this landscape, women face numerous disincentives to become more sexually fluent. These disincentives are multiplied for women who suffer disadvantage in virtue of their race, class, and other vectors of oppression, and for whom exploring and asserting their sexual agency may come at far greater cost.

Sustained pressure from the broader community haspushed many institutions and organizations to intervene in damaging sexual cultures. These interventions remain overwhelmingly focused on changing individual behavior through targeted forms of remedial education. Yet even the most innovative programs of education (e.g., Carmody 2015), which encourage participants to engage in the kind of mutual and respectful communication that is part of exercising and developing sexual fluency (e.g., "What would you like me to do? "What would feel good for you?"), may ultimately prove ineffective in a cultural and institutional climate that undermines the motivation, confidence, and trust for sexual actors to ask these questions, and which encourages them to fall back on reductive sexual norms to guide their patterns of questioning and response.

In the absence of concurrent attempts to provide actors with empowering sexual imaginaries and to address the coercive conditions that form the backdrop to heterosex, there is a further risk that sex education modules and other behavioral tools that are being rolled out by universities and workplaces will compound women's lack of self-confidence, to the extent that they may find it difficult to assert their sexual agency even after further "education." Furthermore, the introduction of mandatory trainings and workshops can provoke defensiveness and pushback among those who perceive themselves as wholly autonomous, self-determining actors who behave ethically and respectfully, and who do not take themselves to be in need of behavioural correction. Thus, cultivating sexual fluency highlights the need for further initiatives that, in Gavey's words (2005, 223–24), are more "indirect," and which involve efforts to diversify the hermeneutical backdrop against which sexual relations unfold (see also Hänel 2018).

Reshaping sexual imaginaries

The foregoing examples capture some of the ways in which dominant and deeply embedded imaginaries undermine the capacity of men and women to become more fluent as sexual actors. The socially and institutionally supported sense of sexual entitlement among men with power and privilege leaves little incentive for them to become more curious and respectful vis à vis women's experiences, wants, and needs. This lack of incentive is compounded by the fact that cultivating sexual fluency may involve

normative transgressions that carry affective costs and social penalties (e.g., the contempt, ridicule, and rejection of other men; feelings of shame, humiliation, and confusion). Women, by comparison, confront a multiplicity of disincentives and obstacles to developing greater sexual self-understanding, self-confidence, and self-respect. In cases where women make efforts to enquire into their partner's distinctive needs, and to recognize desires which sit at odds with dominant norms of male sexuality, the threat of male defensiveness and resentment can be pronounced. As one young woman reflects:

> I know I wanted to have sex … But I did ask him because I kinda felt … just because I was so forward with it all the time, I just wanted to make sure he was along for the, like was there as well … cause yeah, cause a lot of times … you just kind of follow along with the progression of things … I asked him before we had sex, are you sure you're okay with this? And he was like, yeah! Like what the fuck, like why are you asking that question? ("Karen," qtd. in Beres and Farvid 2010, 388)

An uncritical reliance on dominant social imaginaries to guide one's sexual agency cannot be remedied through simply encouraging individuals to exercise greater critical awareness and self-vigilance. As the preceding discussion has foregrounded, the embodied and unconscious aspects of dominant social imaginaries, and the sedimentation of these imaginaries in institutions that powerfully govern human thought, action, and motivation, can make this reflective task highly difficult to sustain on one's own.

Working towards sexual fluency is not an entirely individualistic practice, nor is it a matter of extracting oneself from the web of social "fictions" that condition one's sexual subjectivity to gain access to one's "real" and "authentic" self. As Gatens points out, there is no place outside of a given social imaginary for subjects to occupy; rather, "the human condition is a condition of illusion" (1996, 136). On this view, one's sexual agency is always mediated by wider social structures. The task is then to ensure that these mediating structures are rendered expansive and heterogenous enough to recognize and support a plurality of desires and preferences that are worthy of recognition, and which are conducive to individual flourishing. Meeting this condition would help to ensure that the agentic capacities of sexual actors are sufficiently scaffolded and that such actors are given ample opportunities and resources to become sexually fluent; that is, to explore and articulate diverse needs and wants without fear or shame.

From an interventionist standpoint, Gavey rightly argues that we need to commit to the "less direct work" of "reworking the substance of contemporary common sense so as to transform the cultural horizon of possibilities for [ ] expanding femininities and masculinities" (2005, 223–24). How, then, to dismantle deep structures and background conditions that breed sexual disfluency among individuals? How to "rework the substance of contemporary common sense" and create the conditions for sexual fluency to emerge? In addressing these challenges, it is important to recognize that patterns of disfluency will not simply disappear when it is shown that certain images, stereotypes, or concepts are false or distorted. Imaginaries tend to be more resilient than this, and often seem impervious to counter-arguments and the assertion of facts (Lennon 2010, 387; also Gatens 1996).

Cultivating sexual fluency calls for interventions that can constructively engage the cluster of images and affects that are reinforced in and through various social and institutional practices (and which can readily crowd out any benefits that are accrued through participation in isolated education programs). As a tool for this last, the law

is a blunt instrument. Tougher punishments for those who engage in misogynistic acts, and removing sexist images from public circulation, will not automatically free individuals to imagine their sexual selves in less rigid and more empowering ways (cf. Cornell 1995). Concurrent commitments to developing and promoting more pluralistic imaginaries are also required so that individuals are provided with better resources to reframe and reimagine their sexual subjectivities (see James 2002). In other words, "reworking the substance of contemporary common sense" in support of sexual fluency will need to extend to the provision, centralization, and uptake of alternative sexual imaginaries that have a strong affective purchase, and which can restructure patterns of sense-making among sexual actors.

Dominant sexual imaginaries are not all-encompassing and immutable: when the imaginings of unjustly marginalized actors are brought from the margins to the centre, they can provide a forceful counterpoint to regnant imaginings and their affective "bite." Examples of this shift can be seen in the promotion of images that celebrate vulnerable and sensitive men, and which provide a powerful counterpoint to the aggressive promotion of "hard" masculinities. We are also bearing witness to the mainstreaming of feminist erotica, which features arousing images of both men and women as equally empowered in the sexual encounter. This trend has been accompanied by the rise of queer erotica, which offers ways of imagining sexual relations that extend "beyond hegemonic values and subject positions" and which promotes (and eroticizes) difference and fluidity (Bauer 2014, 239–40). The counter-imaginaries embedded in such productions, and the new affective possibilities and relations they open up, promise to benefit not only heterosexual subjects but also non-heterosexual, queer subjectivities who are denied visibility and recognition against the backdrop of hegemonic sexual imaginaries.

Initiatives that educate women about their bodies and sexual pleasure are equally pivotal to the development of sexual fluency. Online initiatives like "OMG Yes" (www.omgyes.com) instruct both women and men in the various ways women can bring themselves, or be brought by their male partner, to achieve orgasm. The site introduces its subscribers to new sexual concepts, including terms that describe different techniques for stimulating the clitoris (e.g., "shallowing"; "angling"; "broadening"). By widening existing vocabularies of women's sexual pleasure beyond slang terms and standard medical discourses, and, moreover, by presenting an image of women as entitled to sexual gratification, OMG Yes encourages greater clarity and fidelity among women with respect to what brings them sexual satisfaction. By including first-person narrations from women of various backgrounds and ages about their own sexual journeys, discoveries, and experiments, OMG Yes promotes an inclusive image of women as active, desiring, and joyful sexual subjects and contributes to a counter-imaginary that opposes dominant narratives of women as passive "gatekeepers" in their sexual relations with men.[20]

The heightened sense of sexual self-confidence and self-respect that women may accrue through engagement with these cultural initiatives and productions can, however, be a fragile achievement: misogynistic imaginaries that are deeply embedded and embodied, and the scorn and ridicule that challenges to these imaginaries typically elicit, constitute an ever-present threat to the maintenance of women's self-respecting postures. Among other things, this issue illuminates the significance of a growing number of online forums (e.g., "Bye Felipe" and "Tinder Nightmares") in which women use humour and derision to mitigate the lived effects of male contempt for their sexual agency and empowerment.[21]

The spaces and practices described above function to supply women not only with a new vocabulary through which to better understand and communicate their

experiences, needs, and desires, but a new imaginary through which they can collectively affirm and appreciate their sexual subjectivity. In doing so, such initiatives contribute to shaping a broader cultural climate in which women may develop the confidence and courage to assert their right to be treated as an agent worthy of recognition and respect, irrespective of the context. This is particularly the case when the alternative imaginaries embedded in these practices become widely institutionalized, and when institutional norms that entrench damaging imaginaries are critiqued, challenged, and transformed. Attempts to centre and embed alternative sexual imaginaries confront significant challenges, however. As Candace Owens' remarks exemplify, efforts to disrupt cultural idealizations of normative femininities and masculinities typically meet with significant pushback, not least because a challenge to these identities represents a challenge to the wider cluster of social norms, practices, and institutions—in short, to the ways of life—that are built upon them. (At the same time, this nested structure can help us to appreciate why challenges to and shifts within a particular institutional structure—for example, a particular legal or educational structure—can provoke shifts in the sphere of sexuality and sexual relations.) Consequently, de-centering dominant sexual imaginaries and encouraging sexual fluency will involve concurrent challenges to *multiple* imaginaries. These imaginaries will include those that positively associate "hard" masculinities with military power, national security, economic prosperity, and political stability (Mann 2014), as well as neoliberal imaginaries that construct institutions like universities and corporate workplaces as mere service providers with no obligation to address cultures of sexual disrespect and entitlement (Hush 2019).

Whether any alternative imaginary "breaks frame" in a manner that contributes to shifts in sexual norms will depend in large part on its resonance with the wider context in which it is embedded. With José Medina (2012, 237), I acknowledge the interrelationship between the "insurrectionary acts" of individuals or collectives pushing for change, and the social conditions and practices that make space for those acts. Those initiatives that have been successful in forcefully challenging dominant sexual imaginaries are always preceded or accompanied by other movements and shifts that allow such initiatives to be perceived as legitimate and persuasive, and to reverberate widely, as opposed to being wholly dismissed. The situated and embedded character of social imaginaries also helps to foreground that struggles for sexual justice and normative change will invariably be inflected by the local contexts in which these struggles unfold, and that localized dynamics will often bear on the shape and form that sexual counter-imaginaries take on.

Whilst interrogating taken-for-granted ways of imagining ourselves and others as sexual actors remains crucial for cultivating sexual fluency, I follow Susan James in noting that the effects of disrupting dominant imaginaries cannot be predicted precisely, nor is there a "recipe for success" when it comes to "undermining or replacing particular images or their effects" (2002, 187). For this reason, such interventions will be a matter of careful, critical, and ongoing experimentation: constant vigilance and continual interrogation of new imaginaries from multiple social perspectives is part of what is needed to build a better sexual culture. The complex and unpredictable process of disrupting patterns of sexual disfluency means that change will take the form of a gradual and roundabout process; one that involves challenges to, and shifts within, sedimented imaginaries and affective ecologies that work to discourage men and women from recognizing, articulating, and honoring desires that depart from reductive imaginings of normative masculinities and femininities.

In drawing attention to the embodied and embedded nature of dominant sexual imaginaries, and its implications for efforts to address unjust sex, I have argued that

the concept of sexual fluency forms an important part of any theoretical toolkit for building a more positive sexual ethics. Yet some concerns may remain. One potential concern is that sexual fluency implies an unwavering degree of confidence and assuredness in one's ability to act as a responsive and responsible sexual actor—a posture that is out of step with a conception of the ethical subject as one who recognizes the need for constant self-vigilance and self-interrogation, especially considering the ever-renewing nature of prejudice and the fact that others can never be fully knowable to us. In light of this concern, it is important to emphasize that achieving sexual fluency does not obviate the need for sustained curiosity and active self-critique. Becoming more fluent in one's sexual life necessarily requires the ongoing participation of a critical and reflective consciousness, as well as the maintenance of a curious and open-minded disposition to ensure that one remains alive and responsive to important shifts in sexual imaginaries (just as a diligent and fluent speaker of a language remains responsive to new vocabulary and meanings). The maintenance of these capacities and dispositions is also important for ensuring that individuals remain attuned to their partner's concrete subjectivity, since individuals are likely to negotiate, accommodate, and enact particular sexual imaginaries in different and unique ways. Diversifying and expanding the hermeneutical backdrop that structures norms of sexual behavior does not remove the need for individuals to practice careful listening to their partners and their set of desires and needs. (To return to the analogy between sexual fluency and linguistic fluency, it may be the case that, over time, romantic partners develop a pidgin language or vernacular that reflects mutual responsiveness to one another's specificity.)

Cultivating a greater degree of sexual fluency among sexual actors is not a matter of expunging all uncertainty, insecurity, vulnerability, and awkwardness from sexual relations. As noted earlier, sexual fluency comes in degrees, and will be affected by the context in which one acts. A fluency-based framework recognizes that miscommunication, misunderstanding, and errors of judgment in sex are inevitable; yet, at the same time, it seeks to guide interventions that can ensure such dynamics do not pass unnoticed and uncorrected, and do not continue to have grossly uneven and deleterious effects on women and other actors whose experiences have been unfairly prevented from shaping authoritative social imaginaries.

I have suggested that the dialogical work of fluency and the virtuous practice of listening it demands require the disruption of materially embedded imaginaries that encourage asymmetries of respect, self-regard, curiosity, and responsiveness among sexual actors. In the current moment we are witnessing various hermeneutical and normative shifts driven by sexual counter-imaginaries that have been swept to the fore by #MeToo and other grassroots movements. The resources that women have at their disposal to grasp, articulate, and honor their sexual experiences have significantly expanded. However, greater collective efforts are needed to create a cultural and institutional context in which the diverse experiences and stories of women are taken seriously, and in which the costs borne by women of becoming sexually fluent are further mitigated.[22] This is especially the case for women of color and other marginalized communities of women who disproportionately suffer the consequences of damaging sexual cultures.

Conclusion: Sexual fluency and just sex

Cahill notes that "learning to be more aware of sexual desires, becoming more fluent in articulating them, and attuning oneself to the meanings of the desires of one's partner(s) all constitute positive developments in becoming an ethical sexual subject"

(2014, 316). Good sex—sex that is mutually enjoyable, respectful, and just—relies in part on the cultivation of sexual fluency. Through homing in on the interpretive, communicative, and embodied capacities that support good sex, and by attending to the role of embodied and materially embedded imaginaries in shaping these capacities, a fluency-based framework helps to spotlight the limitations and promise of particular interventions to create the conditions for better sex.

Fostering an environment that supports rather than undermines sexual fluency necessitates sustained challenges to interlocking imaginaries that restrict the capacity of sexual actors to imagine themselves in more lucid, nuanced, and empowering ways. I have argued that bringing counter-imaginaries from the periphery to the center, and deeply embedding them in social and institutional life, is key to furnishing sexual actors with a more expansive set of resources through which to grasp, express, and honor their wants and needs. This task is by no means straightforward: the outcomes of challenging dominant sexual imaginaries will be difficult to predict, and the consequences of initiating them uneven. In encouraging a broader view of ethical sexual agency, and inviting close inspection of the structural conditions which enable or constrain it, the concept of sexual fluency serves as a valuable guide for promoting women's agency and their rights to be treated with respect, both within and beyond the sphere of sexual relations.

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Notes

1 https://twitter.com/RealCandaceO/status/1327691891303976961

2 My account of sexual fluency also aspires to be relevant and constructive for approaching the ethics of sexual encounters involving disabled actors, whose sexual agency is all too often erased or denied (see Kukla 2021). It recognizes that fostering sexual fluency among actors with different types of disabilities is always a possibility, and will rely on specific sets of social and structural supports. I am grateful to Quill Kukla for encouraging me to reflect on this point.

3 My exploration of sexual fluency represents an attempt to expand and diversify the available set of conceptual resources for understanding and addressing the ethics of sex. As such, it is in keeping with recent efforts to develop different conceptual frameworks for approaching sexual ethics and to move beyond a narrow reliance on the language of consent (see, e.g., Bauer 2014 on "care"; Churcher and Gatens 2019 on "sexual honour"; Lamb et al. 2021 on "mutuality"). It is worth noting, however, that my account of sexual fluency is friendly to feminist models of sexual consent. Generally speaking, these accounts do not reduce consensual sex to a contractual encounter involving an isolated moment of verbal agreement to sex. Rather, consensual sex is treated as an agentic, dialogical, collaborative activity involving ongoing, mutually respectful forms of communication that can take on various forms, and as an activity which requires structural support (e.g., Bussel 2008; Kukla 2021). My account of sexual fluency, and the conditions under which it is enabled or constrained, supplements and extends this important body of work by drawing into focus the cluster of interpretive, communicative, and embodied capacities that support ethical sex, and by attending to the influence of social imaginaries on these capacities. As this paper explains, a focus on the imaginary connects the concept of fluency qua individual capacity to broader structural dynamics—among them, the nexus of cultural significations, affect, and institutions.

4 The concept of the "imaginary" has been developed and taken up in various ways within the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, phenomenology, and anthropology. Susan James identifies two trends in the existing literature: first, those who tend to treat the imaginary as an "individual psychic phenomenon which can be enhanced or damaged by the social environment," and those who treat it as "a social phenomenon which plays a role in the construction of individual subjectivity" (2002, 175). Representatives of the former approach include Jacques Lacan and Drucilla Cornell, and representatives of the latter include Cornelius Castoriadis, Michèle le Doeuff, Charles Taylor, and Moira Gatens. In line with the latter train of thought, this paper adopts a view of the imaginary as intrinsically social: it treats the imaginary as the tacit backdrop against and through which individuals come to understand themselves as social actors, including what their status is in relation to others; their sense of what they are entitled to; what counts as appropriate or inappropriate behavior for them in a given context, and so on. As the first section elaborates, the social imaginary of a culture is inextricably bound up with human capacities of imagination and feeling, and gives rise to shared habits of perception and collective behaviors among different groups of social actors. The meaning and significance that cultural significations confer on bodies and practices, and affective investments therein, become sedimented in and reproduced by social institutions of various kinds (I return to this point later). For a detailed account of the connection between cultural significations, affect, power, and institutions, see Celermajer et al. 2019; Churcher et al. 2022.

5 Institutions have been defined in various ways (see Hodgson 2006). In this paper I treat institutions as formal, durable, and materially sedimented structures characterized by particular sets of rules, norms, and practices that shape, regulate, and stabilize patterns of social behavior.

6 Whilst this paper draws analogies between sexual fluency and linguistic fluency, it is important to note that linguistic fluency has been conceived in different ways, and in ways that depart from my account of it here. Within foreign language studies, talk of linguistic "fluency" has been replaced in some circles by talk of "proficiency," insofar as the former is thought to connote a static achievement. In other contexts, "disfluency" has been used to describe certain forms of speech disabilities, such as stuttering. As will become clear, I am not thinking of sexual fluency in terms of a static or fixed achievement, nor am I thinking of sexual disfluency in terms of a disability. My account of sexual fluency overlaps with a folk conception of linguistic fluency as a capacity for fluid communication, understanding, and responsiveness.

7 Any inclusive and non-paternalistic account of sexual ethics should leave room for the fact that ethical and just sex can be had in the absence of sexual desire or pleasure, so long as one's agency is scaffolded in the right way (Kukla 2018, 2021; also Cahill 2014). For this reason, my account of sexual fluency focuses not only on the affirmation and articulation of sexual pleasures or desires that are worthy of recognition, but also (and more broadly) on supporting people's agentic capacities as sexual actors.

8 As Miranda Fricker argues, the systematic exclusion of women's distinctive voices and perspectives from key institutions and fields of meaning-making (e.g., law, medicine, media, and academia) has served to deprive them of an appropriate and publicly recognized language through which to make sense of, and give voice to, many of their lived experiences (2007, 149–54). Where women once lacked the term "sexual harassment," for example, they were forced to contend with ill-fitting interpretations of repeated and unwanted sexual advances as "unwelcome flirting" (149–50). Consequently, many women were prevented from making sense of their experience as a kind of moral and legal wrong, either to themselves or to others. In Fricker's view, the fact that the concept of sexual harassment was missing from collective epistemic resources meant that neither men nor women had a proper understanding of the meaning and significance of this behavior. Nevertheless, this shared "cognitive handicap" was disadvantageous only for women (151). As later parts of this paper will elaborate, women continue to disproportionately suffer the consequences of gaps in dominant cultural narratives of sexuality.

9 I understand affect to be inherently relational as opposed to taking the form of a private inner state or emotion that remains contained to the feeling individual. Affective relations represent "relations of reciprocal efficaciousness between bodies" that are enmeshed with fields of social meaning and which embed and mediate power relations of various kinds (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019, 27; also Celermajer et al. 2019). A key feature of affect and the social imaginaries that condition affective relations is that these phenomena tend to exert their effects at a level below doxastic awareness, and are often marginally responsive to fact-giving and counter-arguments.

10 Acknowledging this possibility does not entail that men should not be held responsible for unethical sexual behavior when acting under the influence of damaging sexual imaginaries. As later parts of this paper suggest, it is always possible for individuals to gain critical distance from the socially shared narratives

that condition their agency. However, this discussion also acknowledges that gaining this distance through individual volition can be hindered by one's social and institutional context. Following Miranda Fricker (2007) and José Medina (2012), it is my view that remedying the effects of unjust hermeneutical gaps requires efforts at the level of individual practice as well as wider structural changes. See Medina (2012) for a nuanced discussion of individual responsibility and accountability vis à vis dominant social imaginaries and the bodies of ignorance they sustain.

11 As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, "our body is not a thing, it is a situation … it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects" (1953, 61).

12 Studies reveal rough sex to be increasingly normative among young men, who tend to initiate brutish sex irrespective of whether their partner has expressed a desire for it. A recent UK study found that one-quarter of men use unbidden violence during sex, and that 38 percent of women under 40 have experienced unwanted slapping, spitting, choking, and gagging (Harte 2019, quoting Sarante ComRes 2019 BBC 5 Live survey).

13 In focusing on the role of dominant sexual imaginaries in breeding patterns of misunderstanding and miscommunication, my account does not deny the obvious fact that men can (and do) lie about their sexual behavior, and knowingly engage in brutish, unethical sex. With scholars (e.g., Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004; Harris 2018) who have argued against framing sexual violence as something that happens when people simply misunderstand each other (the "miscommunication hypothesis"), my account of sexual disfluency does not seek to reduce such violence to innocent errors of understanding under the weight of distorted (and distorting) sexual imaginaries. Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that, in some cases, men who behave disrespectfully during sex may genuinely believe that they are engaging in sex that is ethically acceptable and mutually enjoyable. Like Harris (2018), I emphasize the complexity and ambiguity that inheres in a great deal of sexual communication and agency, and the need for structural interventions to make up for individual limitations, without accepting the validity of the miscommunication hypothesis.

14 In tracing a connection between dominant masculine imaginaries and sexual disfluency, I do not mean to suggest that a woman's choice to act out scripts of female submission to male domination is necessarily a symptom of sexual disfluency. The woman in question may well fit the profile of a sexually fluent subject if her agency is sufficiently scaffolded. I will later elaborate on what this scaffolding might look like in relation to sexual counter-imaginaries.

15 The HAD is also known as the "gay panic defence." This partial defence allows courts to downgrade a murder conviction to manslaughter if the defendant can prove they were incited to violence by an unwanted advance from a gay man. Whilst not enshrined in law, the defence is a precedent set by other High Court cases where it has been allowed.

16 There has been a ten-fold increase in rough sex claims between 1996 and 2016 in the UK. In all of these cases the perpetrators were male (https://wecantconsenttothis.uk/).

17 Of course, the extent to which male sexual desire is embraced and encouraged, and the extent to which aggressive sexual behavior is condoned or excused, is contingent upon other markers of group identity, including race. As Angel writes, "black men's sexuality is fetishized as an animalistic drive, while being subject to greater sanction than white men's sexuality, particularly when it is seen as encroaching on white women" (2021, 14).

18 There has, however, been a sea of changes in the distribution and content of pornography over the past two decades. The next section outlines emerging and competing sexual imaginaries embedded in queer and feminist erotica.

19 A perception of women as too coy to communicate what they really want as sexual actors (where these wants tend to invariably correlate with rough sex) frequently appears on the social media accounts of young men (Gavey 2018, 235).

20 This paper recognizes that sexual trauma can significantly inhibit a desire for sexual exploration and capacities for sexual enjoyment. My appeal to the importance of sexual fluency, and the sexual self-confidence and curiosity that supports it, does not place demands or obligations on actors who are not ready or able to explore their capacity for sexual pleasure. Sexual fluency among trauma sufferers who benefit from strong communities of support may be restricted to confidently articulating a preference not to engage in sexual self-exploration. Myriad differences in people's sexual histories and experiences foreground the importance of developing and articulating conceptual frameworks that can constructively engage with these differences (see n. 3). Sexual fluency is one concept among many others that should form part of our toolkit for building a positive and inclusive sexual ethics. I am deeply grateful to Henrike Kohpeiss and Ana Barandalla for encouraging me to reflect on this point.

21 These popular Instagram accounts provide an online space for women to share screen-grabbed messages containing sexist and misogynistic comments from men, especially men on dating apps. In these forums, women are given an opportunity to "counterdiscipline" these men "through witty takedowns and derisive laughter" and to draw a sense of comfort and solidarity from these rhetorical practices (Thompson 2018, 85; also Richardson-Self 2021, 177). It is worth noting, however, that advocacy for these forums, and for humour as a counter-disciplinary strategy more generally, must contend with the ever-present and very real risk that men will respond to women's ridicule with violence. I thank Moira Gatens for bringing this point to my attention.

22 This emphasis on structural support and change was at the heart of Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement. This movement was preceded by Burke's co-founding of non-profit programs and organizations designed to support the sexual health and well-being of African American girls and survivors of sexual assault.

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