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## Not All Feminist Ideas Are Equal: Anti-Capitalist Feminism and Female Complicity

By Giuliana Monteverde<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper advocates a more explicit feminist discussion of female complicity by demonstrating that existing discourses on women's participation in patriarchal practices are inadequate. By looking at two contemporary anti-capitalist feminist texts—*One Dimensional Woman* by Nina Power and *Meat Market: Female Flesh under Capitalism* by Laurie Penny—I show that these feminists acknowledge the disrupted sex binary, but have not produced texts that reflect this understanding. Whilst these authors admirably concern themselves with structural reasons for inequality—rather than blaming individual women—their treatment of complicit women is wavering. They are scornful of powerful American Republican women and of 'fun' feminists, but sympathetic or unconcerned with women engaged in performed hegemonic sexuality. I argue that a consideration of female complicity is linked to the reimagining of categories for future feminisms.

*Key Words:* Complicity, Anti-Capitalist Feminism, Postfeminism

### Introduction

This essay seeks to show that a study of female complicity is a worthwhile new direction in feminist studies and a useful paradigm from which to analyse various strains of contemporary feminist discourse. By outlining what I mean by female complicity, I hope to show that feminism should move from a submerged approach to a more explicit discussion of the ways in which women participate in the construction of sexism and the upholding of a patriarchal, or kyriarchal, society.

I will look at two recent anti-capitalist feminist texts—*One Dimensional Woman*, by Nina Power, and *Meat Market: Female Flesh under Capitalism*, by Laurie Penny—in order to examine their approaches to the notion of female complicity. I conclude that this perspective, with its focus on political action and systemic explanations for inequality, does not concern itself enough with the actions of individuals (which is opposite to the approach of liberal mainstream feminists, who focus too much on the actions of individuals). The authors are open to the idea of female complicity, highlighting that women are not inherently better than men, and that they do objectify one another, but do not offer any conclusive statements on how to deal with this theoretically. These feminists do acknowledge the disrupted sex binary by criticising 'token' or 'decoy' women, but do not extend this to articulate how this affects the traditional categories of feminism.

I argue that focusing mainly on the paradigm of work and women's relationship to it (both inside and outside the home) leads to an incomplete stance on female complicity. Whilst a sustained political critique and awareness of intersectionality is a positive aspect of this type of

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feminism, these authors do not fully explain the issue of complicit women or treat them in a consistent manner. Whilst a structural analysis of power does implicitly suggest that individual action is less important than collective effort, an exclusion of individual female voice means that various categories of women (powerful, sexualised, domestic) appear ambiguously in these texts, undermining the false binary of men versus women, but not offering an alternative model.

Of course, the books discussed here have their own goals, and therefore it is understandable that the authors' approaches to complicity are somewhat problematic given that they are addressing issues of their own. Regardless, it is necessary to critique this particular aspect of their work, with the intention of setting the groundwork for further research and discussions on this issue.

The focal point of both Power and Penny's work is the strong link between feminism, the situation of women, and capitalism—including the feminization of labour, prostitution as sex work, commodified femininity, and unpaid domestic work. Their work contains a sustained and scathing critique of late consumerist capitalism and the hierarchical class system (including sex, race and sexual orientation) stemming from the power inequalities inherent in it. These two texts serve my purposes of looking at the representation of women perceived to be complicit and the treatment of the notion of complicity. Where some authors represent women perceived to be complicit in a problematic way, (e.g. Ariel Levy and Natasha Walter), Power and Penny do so in a less problematic and more varied way. Power and Penny directly address the idea that women aren't inherently pro-woman in a political and academic manner rather than a sensationalist one; the content of these books is therefore interesting for work concerned with ideas of complicity. Furthermore, Power and Penny's work can be conceived of as politicised popular feminism, which is a fairly uncommon genre, and therefore worthy of attention.

I begin by outlining my understanding and application of complicity. I then give a brief overview of contemporary feminism to show why it is necessary to adjust current feminist approaches in line with broad changes in feminist thought. I contextualise the political milieu that Power and Penny are writing in and responding to, and then look at various examples of complicit women in the texts, showing that the differing approaches used by the authors reveal an uneven picture of female complicity.

## **Complicity**

The definition of complicity advanced here refers to the broad notion of participation in a practice, belief, behaviour, or understanding that can lead to oppression, discrimination, or exploitation of your own or another group (group here is a loose term referring to identity politics; I acknowledge that all people cross several identity groups). In its traditional legal meaning, complicity refers to participation in wrongdoing (legal or moral) where someone knows about a crime but does not report it. This suggests somewhat more activity or awareness than my use of it here. Complicity here can refer to inadvertent, passive or apolitical acts (as in, acts carried out with no express political intention, rather than acts with no political meaning), as well as more intentional, active and political ones. An example of commonplace female complicity is the use of cosmetics: women that wear makeup do so not because they actively want to be beauty objects in order to maintain gender inequality, but because of habit, preference, or because there are certain social outcomes for women who look particular ways. Additionally, I accept that particular practices have different meanings in different contexts, and therefore I do not suggest that cosmetics, for example, are unequivocally oppressive. There are

other examples of complicity where women are more explicitly and actively complicit in patriarchal structures. For example, some conservative women who seek to promote traditional heterosexual nuclear families by reducing access to contraception or abortion. This example is an active political action that reduces the status and rights of women. My application of complicity is not absolute, and there are many exceptions within these extreme examples. I do not assume that feminists are not complicit in patriarchy, or that they are wholly distinct from the women they write about.

It is important to stress that I do not consider any individuals to be culpable of their own oppression; I refer to inadvertent collusion with the system. I also consider *everyone* to be complicit with the various social systems they live within. As people living in particular societies, we must fulfil certain roles to be a good employee, a member of a social group, a romantic partner, a daughter, and so on. It is not possible to act always—or ever—in total accordance with one’s sincerely-held political beliefs, and for many people, this is not ever a consideration. With this in mind, I recognise it is impossible to never be complicit with patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy or capitalism, and that individual or group interactions within culture are a process of negotiation and navigation. Talking about a “culture of resistance,” Patricia Hill-Collins says “I suggest that such cultures contain contradictory elements that foster both compliance with and resistance to oppression” (18). bell hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (viii). This definition focuses on sexism, regardless of who perpetuates it, as hooks says:

[T]he movement is not about being anti-male. [My definition] makes it clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be naive and wrongminded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men. (viii)

### **Overview of Contemporary Feminism**

Feminism has undergone significant changes in the last fifty years, moving from gynocentric scholarship that upheld and celebrated apparently inherent female characteristics, to contemporary work that examines gender in relation to other systems of oppression. Where feminists used to describe “female experience” or “female psychology,” they now go to great lengths to unravel the multiple identities and subject positions from which humans operate. This transition towards intersectionality and diversity means that feminism is no longer clear-cut in terms of whom it supports. Whilst feminists still want to challenge gender roles and improve the lives of women worldwide, they no longer champion sisterhood as something of fundamental importance. Because of this shift, feminism is not supportive of all women merely by virtue of their reproductive organs, but is intertwined with particular progressive politics—often a radical one—that includes LGBTQ rights, environmental concern and class struggle.

The male/female binary has been disrupted by postmodernity, and contemporary feminism has been left with a language and categorization problem. Contemporary feminism is highly aware of the intersections of gender, class and race (among others) and has a constant discourse of ‘privilege-checking’ that seeks to redress historical and contemporary inequalities.

Because of this conceptualisation of gender, which was influenced by a postmodern fracturing of the subject, contemporary feminists are extremely hesitant to talk about women as a category with shared experience, suffering or qualities. It is difficult then to advocate for women as a group when it is acknowledged that women are not a group with common characteristics. Additionally, different types of feminists disagree on what a woman is, with some welcoming male-to-female transsexuals and others banning them from 'women-only' spaces. This confusion over categorisation contributes to a situation in which people in the category 'woman' are not necessarily woman-identified, and feminists are no longer simply pro-woman.

Similarly, in feminist discourse, some words refer to characteristics that are seen as socially constructed, but the use of these words maintains an essentialist position on certain categories. Feminists often use words like 'masculinity' or 'femininity' even though they are actively opposed to the idea that gender correlates with biological sex. This linguistic shorthand is understood by those using it, but it halts discourse in a sense. To say 'feminine' and mean "the socially constructed characteristics understood by society to be attributed to women" cannot be the ideal way to theorise and articulate feminist issues. This language and categorisation problem leads to feminisms that understand women can be sexist, but texts that do not convey this awareness. This is symptomatic of an ever-changing field where language does not always match understanding.

### Postfeminism

Academic descriptions and critiques of postfeminism are highly relevant to a study of complicity—both because of the aforementioned changing meanings of gender, and because of representations of gender and gendered behaviour in popular culture. Power and Penny write in and about a postfeminist society, and their references to playboy bunnies, *Girls Gone Wild*, decoy women, and self-help feminism demonstrate this.

In her seminal essay on the subject, Angela McRobbie characterises postfeminism as both taking feminism for granted, and considering it to be finished and therefore irrelevant. She says that the "taking into account-ness" of feminism by contemporary mainstream culture means that it can be dismantled and discredited (28), leaving a landscape devoid of collective political feminism but rife with imagery of so-called female empowerment.

Interestingly, McRobbie alludes to notions of complicity when she refers to the "participatory dynamics" in leisure and daily life wherein young women "endorse (or else refuse to condemn) the ironic normalization of pornography" (34). McRobbie suggests that ideas of "cool" are linked to this "participatory dynamic," and so assumes that young women are aware on some level of feminist criticisms of pornography. She says (emphasis mine):

There is *quietude and complicity* in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and, more precisely, an *uncritical* relation to dominant, commercially produced, sexual representations that *actively invoke hostility* to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation, and pleasure, free of politics.  
(34)

Here we can see McRobbie's frustration with representations that "actively invoke hostility" to feminism, but more interestingly, with a lack of engagement from young women who embrace notions of cool, knowing that they relate somehow to feminist positions, yet remain "uncritical."

It is important to note also the persistence of othering and subsequent blame in more recent feminisms. Second-wave feminism is criticised mainly for its white-centric middle class focus—for focusing on liberation via the workplace, ignoring the fact that many women of colour and working class women had been working for decades, suffering different injustices and stereotypes than white middle class women. These problems prevail today, though there is more of an established body of work outlining precisely the standpoints of women who were marginalised not only by mainstream society, but also by the Women's Liberation Movement. It is an ongoing and serious problem that many white feminists now understand and namecheck these criticisms, but have been unable to transform their perspective to accommodate less privileged views. Recent Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen showed the extent to which white feminists still exclude women of colour, working class women, and non-straight women, and several articles that followed regrettably showed that many white women consider discussions about race within feminism to be infighting and therefore pandering to the patriarchy.

### **Post-Noughties Anti-Capitalism**

Both Power and Penny have a post-2000 anti-capitalist outlook that is qualitatively different from traditional Marxism or socialism. This body of thought is a response to the neoliberalism of the late Twentieth Century and encompasses various re-examinations of Marxist theory. This arguably *post*-post Marxism (as it draws upon Virno and Marcuse) is different from traditional Marxist thought in that the subject is no longer a working-class industrial revolutionary, but can be a range of identity formulations. Also, the economic system is no longer considered to be the unequivocal explanation for how human society functions. Whilst the economic system still has pride of place in post-Marxist feminist critique, the influence of feminist thought means that patriarchy, as well as white supremacy and other types of privilege (depending on discipline and viewpoint) are important nexuses from which to view inequality. Post-noughties anti-capitalism is a response to a variety of political and cultural events, including the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the 2008 economic crash and subsequent bank bailouts, on-going environmental damage, increased worldwide consumption, and an ever-growing gap between the world's richest and poorest.

From the time when these two books were written, there have been numerous radical and revolutionary uprisings in countries around the globe, not necessarily in direct opposition to capitalism—as demands differ across countries and cultures—but in opposition to the status-quo. The 'Arab Spring,' which started in 2010, was an uprising of the masses which demonstrated civil impatience with economic decline, poverty, human rights violations, and political corruption. The 15-M Indignados movement in Spain in 2011 saw 130,000 protestors on 15<sup>th</sup> May alone, and thousands more in the following months. Most famously, inspired by these previous protests, the Occupy Movement began in 2011 and in several months had spread to over 95 cities across 82 countries.

Power and Penny are indicative of this post-2000 anti-capitalism and so are contemporary in terms of political leftism, and progressive in terms of modern feminism (however focusing more-so on issues of class than of race). Whilst both authors write accessibly, their ideas are

theoretically grounded and both are interested in “a political imagination” (Penny, Oxford Debate) that offers more than the patterns of life laid out today.

### **Complicit Women**

Interestingly, Power directly addresses the issue of blame in her introduction. She says:

[this book] tries to avoid straightforward assertions of blame—of capitalism, of women themselves, of forms of feminism that do little to address the real questions—because it is never as simple as uncovering a ‘better’ mode of existence behind the illusion. Such forms of revelation presuppose that the writer is somehow in a privileged position vis-à-vis the dumb, unenlightened masses. (3)

Whilst Power does seem to blame the groups named above to some extent, it is admirable that she does not claim to have the answers but instead advocates collective analysis and critique of the current situation without being overly simplistic. Power’s book intends to identify and discuss “material obstacles to equality” (3). This echoes Marx’s historical materialism, suggesting that ideology within moral, social or political avenues is based on the economic and technological substructure of society. Virno refers to “an objective foundation that reinforces and reproduces deception” (3), referring to the ways that the power dynamic in society is naturalised and made invisible through the economic system and the ideology that constantly legitimates it. Virno maintained that whilst one’s perception of life may be false in a sense—in that it is influenced by numerous outside factors—it is also grounded in some material reality. Explaining post-Fordist semblance he says:

I refer to the ensemble of mentalities, images of the world and of oneself, behaviors and beliefs which, while false (that is, semblances) nonetheless originate in and derive a certain legitimacy from certain quite real and persistent aspects of today’s mode of production. It’s not a question, in other words, of subjective errors produced by the dominant culture, but of representations forcefully suggested by a very concrete condition. (1)

Power invokes Virno to point out that ideology “runs deeper than the hopeful might have previously imagined” (3) and she uses this in some way to permit her critique of other feminisms and various groups of women (although this is not the primary goal of her book). By recognising ideology as grounded in some reality (even if it did not originate in reality), Power can give space to, and rationalise the behaviour of people not active in or aware of her political cause. By seeing ideology in this way, Power shows the need for a more radical approach in feminism, one that moves beyond “turning the tables or changing the language” (3), thus discrediting liberal feminism.

Because of the strong political undercurrent in their feminist analyses, Power and Penny are not content with the success of any woman in any field, but with a politically minded, egalitarian *person* (ideally a woman) that will further their cause and enact some kind of widespread societal change. For them, feminism is not a case of sex, categorisation, and sameness, but of politics. Corrupt men *and* women are contemptible, but to get rid of them, a gender (and race and class) perspective is necessary.

There are a variety of women portrayed as complicit in Power and Penny's texts and I will discuss them individually in the pages to come. The groups are: high-powered American Republican politicians; sexualised women, as described in Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs*; 'fun' feminists like Jessica Valenti; and women who do domestic chores.

Additionally, in *Meat Market* Penny suggests a level of complicity from everyone living in a patriarchal capitalist society. In an email exchange between Power and myself, she too suggested that everyone is inevitably complicit:

I'd begin by suggesting that in many ways it is impossible NOT to be complicit in some sense with capitalism and capitalist culture: almost everyone has to seek employment in order to pay for rent, food etc. The way in which employment demands a certain kind of 'worker' means that people are forced to play roles they might not want to play - the smiling receptionist, for example.

She goes on to say that she is not particularly interested in women "dressing in a certain way that might reinforce gender norms" as "all gender is a performance, even the most "obvious" kinds." Here already we see varying approaches to the idea of complicity, with Power focusing more on work-related complicity than gendered aesthetic incarnations.

### **Powerful and Privileged Women**

Nina Power considers some high-powered political women (Sarah Palin, Condoleezza Rice, Laura Bush) to be complicit in furthering damaging gender stereotypes, actively working to restrict equal rights for women (particularly with regard to reproductive health), and appropriating the rhetoric of feminism for pro-war or anti-choice ends. Power begins by talking about token women or "decoys" (6), to use the terminology of Zillah Eisenstein. Power's controversial stance, following from Eisenstein, is that these decoy women (or people of colour, non-heterosexual people, working-class people) use representation to pretend to be progressive, and then espouse political opinions in direct opposition to those that would benefit people in the groups they come from. She says:

It has long been clear that we need to extend the concept of tokenism to take account of the fact that often these 'exceptional' women and minorities are not just included in positions of power, but come to represent the worst aspects of it.

(6)

Eisenstein's thesis is that imperialist democracies use representation to pretend that society is fair and equal, thus corrupting identity politics in the process (Power, 6). Seemingly there is an issue of individual versus general here, one that Power handles admirably. She singles out some women by name—powerful women in this case—and shows that she is willing to criticise them. Whilst this may otherwise seem anti-woman, in the context of a book that is a theoretical and political reclamation of contemporary feminism, it is not unnecessarily harsh. Perhaps the key is that the women mentioned are powerful and privileged, and therefore worthy of criticism. It is feasible that some feminist responses to female complicity depend on the platform and attitudes of particular individuals, rather than general assumptions about an entire profession or political group.



In *Sexual Decoys*, Eisenstein elaborates on her understanding of gendering. She points out that the inclusion of women in spheres they previously did not have access to (in the Western world), such as the military, leads to a destabilization of “entrenched gender meanings.” This brings up the aforementioned issue of language in feminism, when words like “male,” “female,” “black” or “white” do not have a stable definition. These terms often refer to particular socially constructed or historically played out characteristics, but are understood by those that use them to deny any essentiality or naturalness related to the words. “White” has a particular historical and social meaning, yet those that use it do not assume “white” to be a characteristic only ascribed to white people. In terms of gender, this is related to complicity in that women can be sexist, and men can be feminist. Eisenstein says:

Men can be either male or female, white or ‘other-than’. Racialized gender operates as a decoy. Men can be male-identified males or females given that there are male- and female-bodied men. As such, there are more than two sexes and more than two genders and yet politically we are said and made to be male and female, man and woman. (xi)

In relation to Eisenstein’s explanation of “male- and female-bodied men,” Power uses the word “colonized” (13) in reference to these powerful American politicians, saying “the meaning of feminism must be clear... [it has been] colonized not only by war-mongers, but also by consumerism and contemporary ideologies of work” (13). Colonisation is an apt term for the appropriation of masculinist qualities by women, and for the invasion of feminism by anti-woman women, or male-identified women. By viewing masculinity and femininity as not directly related to sex, both Power and Eisenstein open up the possibility of female complicity in patriarchy.

### **Sexual, ‘Sexualised,’ or Self-Sexualising Women**

Sexualisation has been a pertinent locus of feminist discussion in recent decades. What began as a feminist enquiry into new modes of representation, is now a morally tinged term, frequently used in the mainstream media. Rosalind Gill was interested in the representation of women’s bodies in the media and public space (64), and also “in the way in which some young women seemed to be taking up or even championing these modes of self-presentation” (65). She refers to this as “sexual subjectification” rather than objectification (65). This idea was popularised in mainstream liberal feminist spaces by journalist Ariel Levy in her polemical book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy’s book typifies the way feminist discourse on sexualisation was taken up in less academic terms, and is a bridge from more academic work like Gill’s, to the moral panic on sexualisation in right-wing and conservative spaces (a recent *Daily Mail* headline declares that, “Raunchy, hyper-sexualised popstars like Miley Cyrus and Rihanna damage girls' self-esteem - and could harm education and job prospects”).

In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy shames women for presenting themselves as overtly sexual, and also criticises career women for not participating in an imagined sisterhood. She writes from a liberal feminist stance, and ultimately advocates for more *choice* for women than the narrow commodified options currently on offer. The main issue with Levy’s text is that she

positions herself as different from the complicit women, and does not offer any overarching way to reunite both groups, or to suggest what has caused the split in the first place.

Whilst Power clearly acknowledges the reality of female participation in patriarchal practices, when discussing *Female Chauvinist Pigs* she does not criticise the women in *Girls Gone Wild* videos. Both Penny and Power are much more critical of the companies that promote this monolithic notion of female sexuality than the women involved. Whereas Levy suggests a certain amount of naivety or immaturity on part of the women in *Girls Gone Wild* videos, Power instead focuses on the symbolic meaning of the company's actions:

When the 'Girls Gone Wild' team hand out hats or t-shirts in exchange for a shot of breasts, or the performance of a snog with another woman, the logic is right out in the open: we'll give you something obviously crap in exchange for a kind of performance that reveals that there is nothing subjective, nothing left, hidden behind the appearance, that you are simply commensurate with your comportment in the world. You are your breasts. (24)

In contrast to liberal feminists such as Levy and Walter (particularly in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*), neither Power nor Penny are concerned with "sexualisation" in the sense that it might cause young women to have sex. Rather they are concerned with the framing of the debate and the origins of increased sexual imagery. Again, Power openly acknowledges female complicity; in reference to whether women sexualise one another she says—"they can and they do" (32). She clarifies this point by saying, "clearly there is nothing inherently nicer about women than men," reiterating the position that actions rather than biological body are deserving of recognition, even if the actions are for the rights of a group defined by biological body.

Penny also does not discuss young women in Playboy t-shirts (as Levy does), but instead mentions poststructuralist theories of sign and simulation (9). In a more postmodern approach, she (like Power) suggests that teenagers are fully aware of their gender performativity, rather than totally subsumed in their gender construction—"the pastiche of sexuality adopted by ambitious young people is nothing if not ironic" (13). Penny describes mainstream coverage of 'sexualisation' as "gleeful horror at female promiscuity" (6). Regardless of whether there is an increase in porn-derived sexual imagery, and whether it does negatively affect people, Penny believes that the topic is judged in self-righteous, aghast tones, without any feminist context. This more detached and sympathetic approach from both Penny and Power differs from Power's take on privileged women; neither author is particularly distressed about performed hegemonic sexuality, and definitely not on the same scale as Levy and Walter in *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and *Living Dolls*.

Furthermore, both authors' treatment of sexuality is attentive to structural inequality, historical context and feminist theory. Penny treats beauty rituals in the same way she does domestic chores, by categorising the two woman-centred activities as undervalued and unnoticed work that should be recognised. Rather than seeing beauty practices as solely oppressive (radical perspective) or empowering (lipstick feminist perspective), she sees them as work:

The sexual sell is real labour, propping up a socially mandated measure of erotic capital. From the working hours devoted to the purchase and strategic application of clothes and hair and beauty products, to the actual labour of dieting and exercise, to the creation and maintenance of sexual persona, self-objectification is

work, first and foremost. Female sexuality, which everyday becomes increasingly synonymous with objectification, is work. (17)

This approach is particularly sympathetic to women complicit in propping up ‘the beauty myth.’ Penny sees these women (who make up a particularly huge group, presumably including Penny herself) as victims of a sexist double standard that constantly sells beauty products to women while complaining that they are too image focused and superficial.

In an article in *The New Statesman*, Penny reiterates that the issue of beauty should be seen in relation to work:

We love to talk, as a society, about beauty and body weight—indeed, many women writers are encouraged to talk about little else. What we seldom mention are the basic, punishing double standards of physical appearance that are used to keep women of all ages and backgrounds in our place...it’s an expensive, timeconsuming [sic] and painful rigamarole of cutting, bleaching, dyeing, shaving, plucking, starving, exercising and picking out clothes that send the right message without making you look like a shop-window dress-up dolly.

Penny’s use of active verbs reflects the effort undertaken by women in order to maintain particular conventions of female attractiveness. This post-Marxist position relates to Marcuse’s notions of repression in *Eros and Civilisation*. Marcuse states that citizens in late-capitalist societies do not know that even their leisure is work, and that “the promotion of thoughtless leisure activities” and “the triumph of anti-intellectual ideologies” highlights this (74). By seeing beauty practices as activity, rather than superficial, oppressive, or innocuous, Penny invokes the post-Marxist frustration with the pervasiveness of alienated labour in all corners of Western societies.

Penny, in line with most feminists, considers all women to be on a continuum of sexism and misogyny, with prostitutes and transsexuals suffering the most violent abuse of all. By seeing *all* women as suffering inequality by various means, including the participation of most women in some sort of traditional adornment, she absolves them of overt and intended complicity in the same way that Power does with her interpretation of Virno. If women live in a patriarchal capitalist society and suffer inequality in various ways to various extents, then everyone is complicit in upholding the status quo in some way. Perhaps this approach would benefit from some judgement from Penny herself on the practices discussed. Her presentation of beauty as work reveals the effort and energy that women put into it, but does not make an assessment on whether aspects of it are broadly positive or negative.

### ‘Fun’ Feminists

A target that does bring overt criticism from Power is Jessica Valenti, and other ‘fun’ feminists guilty of obscuring feminism’s radical roots. Power’s anger with Valenti and other mainstream feminists lies in their apolitical stance and failure to discuss “the C word”—capitalism (Manifesto, 1:30). In her introduction, Power says “this short book is partly an attack on the apparent abdication of any systematic political thought” (1), and goes on to accuse contemporary feminists of using the same empty rhetoric of empowerment that consumerist culture does. Power refers to Valenti’s *Full Frontal Feminism* as a self-help book, but not a

feminist one, saying, “the political and historical dimensions of feminism are subsumed under the imperative to feel better about oneself” (7). In a talk about contemporary feminist literature, Power critiques the “aesthetic and moral discourse” of feminists like Natasha Walter and Kat Banyard, saying they provide a description of the symptoms of the problem, rather than a meaningful analysis of it (Manifesto, 1:50). Power does direct her criticism at the tone and content of these feminist works, rather than the women who wrote them. A textual analysis then absolves the authors somewhat, enabling Power to reject aspects of particular texts but not portray Jessica Valenti as akin to Laura Bush. It is noteworthy however that these feminists are portrayed to some extent as complicit by Power (because they are contributing to feminist discourse), whereas other women (namely sexual or ‘sexualised’ ones) are not.

### Domestic Women

Domesticity has always been a significant topic in feminist debate, and has often been positioned as oppositional, or at least, in conflict with feminism. The domesticity debate is problematised by the fact that many women of colour and working-class women have been juggling a double workload for decades, as well as facing different issues about their representation as mothers and wives in the media. Whilst domesticity does not have the centrality in feminist thought as it once did, some contemporary feminists (Penny included) are starting to look to the glamorization of 1950s housewives (cupcake classes, knitting clubs, *Mad Men*, 1950s fashion and interior design) as a worrying retro-sexist trend. Another aspect of this debate, and one that is important for anti-capitalist feminists, is the issue of immigrants and women of colour as nannies and cleaners for white women that are successful in the public sphere. For an anti-capitalist feminist, this is further proof that liberal feminism does not do enough.

In *Meat Market*, Penny says “adult men and women have colluded” (58) in keeping men oblivious of basic skills required to survive. It is interesting that Penny focuses on men, pointing out the irony that the most powerful member of the family (and society) is believed to not know how to prepare a meal or wash his own socks. She recognises the scope of female complicity in this domain, saying, “One of the most difficult things for feminists to acknowledge is the real harm done by women as well as by men in the domestic sphere” (53). She goes to great lengths to highlight the participation of women in this area, at one point suggesting that mothers train their daughters in feminine duties out of the “consequence of hard-packed resentment at cultural isolation and forced drudgery” (53). She extends this analysis of complicit home-runners to include the additional exploitation of migrant workers who are drafted in to clean and cook for the white Western women that can afford to pass on the burden of work inside the house. She says, “very many women would rather be complicit in the exploitation of other, poorer women than confront their own partners” (60). The important aspect of the domesticity debate is that it makes all (or almost all) women complicit in the upholding of patriarchy, in much the same way beauty does. Many feminists have strong political views on a variety of issues, but domesticity and beauty practices are activities enshrined in day-to-day life for most women, and often passed down and perpetuated by women themselves.

Whilst Penny does discuss female complicity in the domestic sphere at length, she clearly extends this analysis to other areas too. Talking about eating disorders, she encourages female readers to “take responsibility for our part in the cruel machine” (29) and asserts that “women are not powerless beings without agency” (29). The solution for Penny then is to politicise women,

particularly in a way that categorises prostitution, beauty maintenance, childrearing and domestic chores as valid, necessary work, seen as equal to jobs undertaken outside the home. There are calls for protest and resistance throughout the book and she reiterates Carol Hanisch's classic feminist mantra that "the personal is political," saying that women's bodies are "a collective site of material production" that must "collectively refuse to submit to capitalist body orthodoxy" (65). This position is crucial, again showing that sisterhood is not necessary just for the sake of itself, certainly not based on a biological essential, but because as a collective (yet disparate) group, women are a sex-class that suffers numerous injustices.

### Literary Features

Penny pokes fun at contemporary attitudes—"Even babies are now born with the Playboy Bunny image tattooed onto their eyeballs. Their fault, the little tarts, for daring to look at the future" (5). This comment is not just a dig at the mainstream media, or the conservative right, but also at mainstream feminists who focus more on Playboy than capitalism. Penny parodies the morally horrified voice used in more liberal, mainstream feminist texts. She does not quote individuals to indict them or to aggravate the reader, and her use of irony, hyperbole and free indirect discourse is rhetorically different from Walter and Levy's use of direct speech. She also uses the passive grammatical voice to literalise accusations of passivity: "women are commanded," "we are obliged," "it is made clear to us," "it is far harder to challenge that culture," (22) "we are bombarded," "corralled into rituals" (1). These words demonstrate the strength of certain ideological messages, yet also insinuate apathy on the part of female citizens; this is further accentuated by the use of the passive voice, which evokes passivity in a linguistic sense.

Penny's language is very telling in terms of her portrayal of institutions versus individuals. The title of her book is reflective of her visceral, corporeal presentation of humans, which contrasts with the sterility of the society they inhabit. When talking about sex ('real' sex as opposed to sex depicted in pornography), she talks of "ooze and tickle" (6), "fumbling, awkward, sticky revelations" (14), and "the panting border between dream and secretion." This materialist depiction of sex harks back to 1970s feminism (particularly Greer), which expressed the reclamation of the natural female state through imagery of bodily fluids. Through this language, Penny emphasises the chasm between reality and media representations of reality—between signified and sign. She presents humans as dirty, sticky, sexual beings that are resisting, or being squashed by, the squeaky, mechanised corporations of consumerist capitalism. The following quote shows how she refers to humans in terms of their bodies, as a way of delineating them from dehumanising media depictions:

The eroto-capitalist horror of human flesh, and of female flesh in particular, is a pathology that can and must be resisted. If we are to free ourselves from this pernicious fear of flesh, we have to learn to live in our own meat. (16)

Penny's representation of society versus humanity makes it possible to criticise some women. Her depiction of systems as being mechanical and sterile, and therefore sinister, allow for human error. This is similar to Power's use of Virno at the start of *One Dimensional Woman*.

The literary techniques used by these authors do not reveal a consistent picture of female complicity. At times the authors are sympathetic, understanding that women (and men) operate

in a certain society and are limited by the traditions, ideologies and norms of that society. At other times, the authors are outright mocking of complicit women—particularly fun feminists and powerful political women—though, this could be because these women have substantial privilege, power and platform to respond.

### **Conclusion**

Power and Penny represent a feminist position that sees the oppression of women as intrinsically linked with class, consumerism and consumption. This stance, whilst politically informed and critical of more liberal ‘fun’ feminisms, has some issues with emphasis, in that it mentions but does not elaborate upon the issue of female complicity. Both Power and Penny say that women are not inherently better than men, and that they are complicit (but not to blame) in objectifying each other and doing the brunt of domestic work (amongst other things). Power is openly critical of high-powered women and the work of other feminists, but neither author has a sustained position on the idea that women maintain and further patriarchal practices or beliefs.

Anti-capitalist feminism, by definition, is concerned with the intersections of class and sex, and these pamphlet-like polemics promote collective action for revolutionary change. This approach does suggest that individual actions are secondary to collective ones, and the binary of male and female is broken down by frequent criticisms of women. However, the work is only half done; Power and Penny know that women are not feminist or progressive by default, but offer no model or means of understanding this in the context of anti-capitalist feminism.

By looking at two texts within a particular genre of contemporary feminism, I have shown that there is not an overt discussion of female complicity within this area—and I argue that considering recent changes in feminist thought, it is vitally important to address the ways in which women participate in the construction of sexism in society. Other genres of feminism also do not have a stance on female complicity—including liberal and radical feminism—and moving forward with this paradigm would lay the groundwork for a new direction in feminist studies that acknowledges the fluidity of gender, and the intersections of gender with race, class and sexual orientation. A more complete feminist awareness and acknowledgment of female complicity is linked to the reimagining of categories for contemporary and future feminisms.

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