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# Easier Than Saying No: Domination, Interpellation, and the Puzzle of Acquiescence

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(Received 23 July 2019; revised 11 February 2021; accepted 27 May 2021)

## Abstract

This article treats ambiguous heterosexual experiences—not quite rape, but not quite “just sex” either—as a form of domination, distinct from both coercion and productive power. It argues that if we wish to make sense of the power dynamics involved in these experiences, it may be useful to view the domination that takes place as a kind of interpellation, understood in the Althusserian sense as a mutually constitutive dynamic in which ideologies create “good subjects,” and subjects reproduce ideology. Considering heterosexual domination as a form of Althusserian interpellation enables us to see the power in question as an embodied, intersubjective relation that demands the complicity of dominated persons, with lasting effects on their subjectivity. This approach avoids positing the dominated as helpless victims or passive objects, while bearing witness to and shedding light on their experiences.

## The Puzzle of Acquiescence

The #MeToo movement has enabled the telling of many stories of heterosexual misconduct, including a range of ambiguous experiences that do not fit into the legal categories of rape or assault. The women involved may themselves struggle to name their experiences, acknowledging that even though they did not desire any sexual interaction, they did not say no at the time. Describing their lack of resistance, they say things like “technically, I could have left” and “I just sort of caved.” But they also express discomfort, regret, or anger about what happened. A stark tension thus appears between what these women say they should have done, and what they actually did. What accounts for this tension?<sup>1</sup>

Responses to these kinds of stories in popular media tend to offer binary, legalistic, or moralistic judgments of both the man and the woman involved. Either he is a predator and she is a victim, or he is just insensitive and she is weak. Pundits have come down on both sides of the divide, disagreeing about stories such as the one that “Grace” told about Aziz Ansari—whether he was a predator or merely a “bad date” (Way 2018; Weiss 2018; North 2019). The women in these situations tend to be forced into one of two sharply defined categories: victim or agent. But these binary approaches lead us away from the kind of analysis that might shed light on the puzzle posed by

these experiences. For example, Abby Schachner describes a phone call with comedian Louis CK in which she could hear him masturbating but “didn’t know how to end it. . . . ‘You want to believe it’s not happening,’ she said” (Ryzik, Buckley, and Kantor 2017). It is easy for observers to say how Schachner should have ended it: just hang up the phone. But the empirical literature, accounts in popular media, and anecdotal evidence all suggest that to treat these kinds of experiences as the women’s own failures to adequately assert themselves is to efface a very commonplace form of suffering, and ignore a pervasive form of gendered power.

At the same time, simply calling CK a predator and his actions assaultive may be unsatisfactory. Those of us who have had similar experiences may recognize a strange gap between what we believe we should have done, and what we actually did in the moment. Addressing this gap does not mean setting aside the culpability of the man in question, but it does mean resisting the impulses toward binary thinking and toward seeing the experience only in terms of individual attitudes and actions. As Linda Martin Alcoff argues, we have to be willing to think in deeper, more nuanced ways about these situations, and we shouldn’t fear developing “a more complex understanding of the constitution of the experience of sexual violence or the sometimes complicated nature of culpability” (Alcoff 2018, 1–2). These questions become even more pressing when we turn from celebrity examples, in which we might presume that the man in question has some obvious power over the woman, to examples of ordinary couples, in which the power dynamics may be more subtle and complex.

One might frame an analysis of these experiences in a number of different ways; in particular, one could approach this gray area from the direction of the rich body of feminist theories of rape. Clearly much of that literature is relevant to the question at hand. I do build on the insights of Alcoff as well as those of Ann Cahill, and in a general way on Catherine MacKinnon’s insights into heterosex as a continuum of domination (MacKinnon 1989). But applying theories of rape to this gray area leaves us needing to distinguish the two, and to address the complex nature of the agency exercised by women in these experiences (Cahill 2016). Such projects are beyond the scope of this article. In this work my priority is to understand the phenomenon as a particular range of experiences of power.

I begin with the assumption that power accounts for the tension between what women wish they had done and what they did. But what kind of power? I will refer to the power at hand as domination in order to distinguish it from both coercion and productive power. Setting aside for the moment the ways in which different dimensions of power can interact with one another and function as a coherent system, we might say that in coercive interactions we consciously recognize that what is happening to us is wrong. By contrast, experiences shaped by power’s effects on our subjectivity may appear unremarkable, acceptable, or normal. When women consent unwillingly, or when they acquiesce because it is difficult to say no, the dynamic is distinctive: no physical force or violence is applied, but women behave *as if* they had no alternative. Women also describe feeling confused, frustrated, or uncomfortable at the time, and express awareness of the gap between what they wanted and what they did in the moment. The experience does not feel normal to them, and their own behavior does not reflect who they think they are or who they want to be. To address the complexity and ambiguity of these experiences, to “understand the tangled questions of sexual agency and culpability” (Alcoff 2018, 5), it is important not to reduce them to a familiar kind of power—either coercion or productive power.

For that reason, I will use the term *domination* to characterize gray sex, but almost as a placeholder, trying not to beg too many questions about the nature of the phenomenon in question. Unlike power in general, which may be democratic or allow possibilities of resistance (depending on one's definition), domination always implies inequality, injustice, and stark limits to resistance. Its Latin root, *dominus*, denotes a specific person exerting exploitative control over the body of another person in discrete moments. This implication of embodied injustice is useful for distinguishing domination from power, more generally understood. However, one of the key peculiarities of heterosexual gray sex is that it is not simply a binary of subject and object, but a relation in which the woman is not only a victim but also a participant—albeit an unequal one, whose agency is sharply constrained or ambiguous. So, although I use the term *domination* in this work in order to distinguish the power dynamics at play from both coercion and productive power, future work will need to address the nature of the agency women exercise in the context of these experiences, and the relationship between agency and domination.

I theorize the kind of domination experienced in the gray area between assault and “just sex” (Gavey 2005) as enacted in part through interpellation in its embodied, intersubjective form. For Louis Althusser, interpellation is the process by which ideology calls subjects into being, creating relationships of asymmetrical interdependence both between ideology and subjects, and also among unequal subjects. Calling on women to become complicit in their own mistreatment, the experience of sexual domination may affect them not only in the moment of domination, but also into the future by disrupting their capacity to author their own subjectivity. Theorizing domination as enacted through interpellation helps us to avoid an “obsessive focus on injury” (Cameron 2018, 4), as well as the tendency to interpellate women as victims or as always already raped (Marcus 1992), while also recognizing the phenomenon as harmful and “part of a cultural pattern that stymies the sort of sexual subjectivity that Beauvoir called for as necessary for women to develop their personhood” (Alcoff 2018, 7). It also enables us to think about power in a way that avoids treating it as an intangible abstraction.

If we theorize power in a Foucauldian vein, we may see the women's subjectivity as already shaped by power in ways that contribute to their inability to act in these situations. Such an approach sheds much light on the dynamics in question, but thinking about power only in this way may not help us distinguish these distinct events from the broader flow of power relations. It does not illuminate how the women's own actions do not smoothly cohere with their sense of their own subjectivity. A phenomenological approach to the experience makes this clear. To tell a more complete story we need both an account of the phenomenon in question and a better developed concept of domination. Ideally, such an approach will enable us to address the puzzle of complicity, taking seriously Nancy Hartsock's challenge: “rather than stop with the fact of participation, we would learn a great deal more by focusing on the means by which this participation is enacted” (Hartsock 1996, 41). Writing more than twenty years later, Bonnie Mann points out that “heterosexuality is still lived, too often, in the mode of appropriation and extraction” (Mann 2018, 404). How that appropriation and extraction takes place is my concern.

In what follows I begin by briefly articulating the limits to the theoretical approaches to power and domination that are most frequently used in thinking about gray sex.<sup>2</sup> I also identify resources in key feminist theories of rape. I then turn to the empirical literature to construct a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the phenomena in

question. Next, I consider an Althusserian notion of interpellation to begin to sketch a way of conceptualizing domination as distinct from both power and coercion.

Ultimately, I argue that a key aspect of ambiguous or gray sex is its capacity for eliciting a response from the dominated person. In discrete, embodied moments, we respond to a specific hail to comply, to be passive, or to be agreeable. This response is not a spontaneous expression, but neither does it indicate that our agency has simply been overridden. It is perhaps less that one's narrative of self is ignored or denied, and more that one's ability to narrate is disrupted. Instances of sexual domination are interpellative in that they make us "good subjects" who cooperate in the moment, and they may have ongoing effects on our subjectivity by undermining our capacity for making sense of our own experience after the fact.

### Domination, Power, and Subjectivity

Several bodies of scholarship shed light on the question of women's continuing acquiescence to unwanted sex: feminist theories of power, feminist theories of rape, plus the emerging literature on the gray area between what Nicola Gavey calls "just sex" and assault. Foucauldian understandings of power have been profoundly influential within these literatures and have been very illuminating, particularly in the work of Lynn Phillips, Gavey, and Alcoff. But as Cahill, Amy Allen, and others have shown, Foucault's theory of domination is underdeveloped. He distinguishes domination from power in an overly absolute way, leaving us with unanswered questions when we attempt to apply his theory of power to gray sex. However, focusing on power as shaping both "corporeal dispositions" and subjectivity, and on the connections between the two, may prove fruitful.

Thus far, Gavey's work goes furthest toward offering a theory of sexual misconduct that is also a theory of power, and that directly addresses the gray area, offering a theory of acquiescence to what she calls unjust sex as "scaffolding" rape culture. Her work is invaluable, and her Foucauldian approach is nuanced and insightful. She is careful to make clear just how many different, specific discourses shape our attitudes and behaviors, rather than relying on a generalized notion of masculine domination or an abstract theory of power. Power does function discursively and by constituting subjects. Clearly, "culturally shared patterns of meaning and normative practices limit us . . . through the installation of frameworks of meaning and practice that guide us on how to be normal members of our culture." This insight enables us to see the "logic of some choices that might seem on the surface irrational and self-defeating" (Gavey 2005, 7).

A key question remains, though: what explains doing something that you *consciously* do not want to do, *as if* you could not resist, when you have some awareness that you can and should resist? The gap between what women consciously believe and what they do, and between their sense of what is normal and their confusing, often disturbing experiences of unwanted sex, suggests a limit to an approach that does not also attend to the embodied, external space in which these experiences take place. My claim is not that it is either/or; I do not want to reduce power either to the tangible and external or the diffuse and internal. As Cahill and others have shown, the existence of a tangible, embodied form of domination such as rape can fuel a discursive form of power: the notion of women as "pre-victims" (Cahill 2001). And the notion that an intangible, discursive form of power can scaffold rape, to use Gavey's language, is also entirely persuasive. But in between violence or coercion and diffuse productive power is something embodied, immediate, and intersubjective. A concept of domination that is clearly

distinguished from both violence and power will be useful for analyzing this embodied, intersubjective dynamic.

Foucault himself does theorize domination as distinct from power, but as several feminist critics have suggested, he does not distinguish it adequately from coercion, and distinguishes it too sharply from power. Where power always entails the possibility of resistance, domination is impossible to resist, appearing external to the subject (Foucault 1997). Strikingly, he uses the example of an eighteenth-century wife who is *dominated* by the institution of marriage of her time, but still retains some *power* in that she is able to refuse her husband sex. The possibility that the wife may not be able, in practice, to refuse sex does not appear in Foucault's account. In her critique of Foucault's call for rape to be treated merely as a crime of violence, Cahill puts the point thus:

Foucault's suggested decriminalization of rape as a sexual crime forgets that the very bodies of rape victims are themselves expressions of a given power discourse, and that the act of rape itself, especially given its pervasiveness, is fundamental to the discourse which defines women as inferior and socially expendable. (Cahill 2000, 58)

Foucault's failure to see rape as far more complex than violent coercion, akin to a crime of straightforward violence such as mugging, highlights his underdeveloped view of domination. His view vacillates between describing domination as treating the dominated person as an object, and exaggerating that person's capacity for resistance. As Allen points out, Foucault fails to capture the ways in which "gender domination is lived through more fluid cultural, symbolic, and social-structural forms" and yet "gendered power relations continue to be blocked, frozen into asymmetrical structures" (Allen 2015, 518). She argues that Foucault does not see modes of subjection as gendered, yet such modes "make being an intelligible subject contingent upon mastering and performing a set of gender norms that systematically devalue femininity and punish the transgression of strict gender binaries," serving to "entrench a state of gender *domination*" (519, emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

Acquiescence to unwanted sex can be partly explained through a Foucauldian approach to power, but cannot be entirely understood without some examination of the embodied, intrasubjective dynamics of the moments in question. What we see in many contemporary accounts is not women who find it exciting to submit, or who find it normal to be passive, but who find themselves unable to assert themselves effectively in the moment, and who struggle to make sense of that inability after the fact. Their stories suggest that their experiences interrupt their senses of the normal and their narratives of self.

The experience of acquiescence to unwanted sex is a commonplace, tangible example of how women continue to experience gendered power today. As Alcoff puts it, it is part of the "constellation of normative, or commonly accepted, behaviors that too often curtail the development of women's and girls' sexual agency: that is, their ability to develop forms of self-regard strong enough to resist the accepted rules of engagement" (Alcoff 2018, 7). What is still unclear are the ways in which sexual domination entails specific harms not by simply overriding women's agency, but by recruiting it.

Doing something you do not want to do, violating who you think you are, is itself a significant harm, but a harm that tends to be rendered invisible if we assume that if a person could have said no but did not, she must have been willing, even if

unconsciously. Rebecca Stringer draws attention to the dangers of such thinking—of focusing only on the intrasubjective and seeing suffering “as arising out of the sufferer’s inner world, rather than as a testament to a wrong that has taken place in worldly power relations” (Stringer 2013, 151). That women exercise some agency in these experiences does not negate Stringer’s point. It only makes it more imperative that we consider the exercise of agency in the context of “worldly power relations,” and that we distinguish agency from liberation. This project calls for an embodied approach, as Lois McNay argues:

Focusing on the embodied register of social experience . . . potentially highlights mundane types of social injustice and domination that have significance for the individual but are often overlooked by political theorists. A focus on embodied experience sheds light not only on the said, but also on the unsaid, on negative social experiences which may remain unarticulated as a distinct claim about injustice even though their pathological effects may be widespread. (McNay 2014, 20)

McNay is not suggesting that we abandon theory to become chroniclers of suffering. Along with Cahill, Iris Marion Young, and others (Young 1990; Cahill 2001), she sees structural oppression as “internalized by corporeal dispositions, and, to combat this, political theory needs to have an interpretive element—a phenomenology of injustice—that is explicitly attuned to the ordinary violences of everyday life” (McNay 2014, 29). Indeed, as the empirical literature shows, naively relying on women’s own interpretations of their experiences tends to participate in the effacement of the violence, as many women not only exercise agency in the moment of domination, but also after the fact in ways that may minimize the harms done to them, for instance saying, “I wasn’t really raped because I didn’t say no.”

In order to understand the power dynamics present in gray sex, we need to take the subjectivity of the women in question as shaped in part by productive power but also affected in the moment that they find themselves acquiescing, as well as afterwards, as they try to make sense of what has happened. Addressing the ways in which embodied experience might have a complex relationship with subjectivity, Cahill writes that rape threatens not just the body of the victim but her very personhood and “the possibility of [her] subjectivity” (Cahill 2001, 142). For Alcoff, “the problem of sexual violation is its effect on the conditions in which we develop both a caring and a making relation to our sexual selves. . . . What is violated is. . . the practical activity of caring for the self” (Alcoff 2018, 144–45). I would suggest that less traumatic events may also affect the subjectivity of those who experience them, and that those effects are distinctive because of the participation of the dominated person in their own domination.

### Saying Yes, Whether You Want to or Not

My approach is to try to understand these questions of power and subjectivity by paying close attention to various accounts of gray sex before offering a theoretical interpretation of them. If we want to avoid begging the question of how power functions in such interactions, we need to consider how women themselves describe their experiences. There is a caveat, though: an account of women’s experiences needs to be joined by the awareness that women’s own interpretations of their experiences often change over time, that they may in certain moments minimize or normalize what happened, and that self-blame and somewhat implausible assertions of agency are not necessarily

to be taken at face value. A critical awareness of such tendencies is not the neutrality of an “expert” observer so much as an acknowledgment of women’s need for infinite revision of their own narratives (Brison 2002).

Several themes emerge repeatedly from the empirical accounts of acquiescence, or “situations in which a man applied pressure that fell short of actual or threatened physical force, but which the woman felt unable to resist” (Gavey 2005, 136) or in which “a woman might have unwanted sex even when her partner has applied no direct pressure” (10). Much research has explored these themes; I highlight them briefly as foundational for a theoretical analysis of the power entailed in these experiences. First, many women describe a kind of paralysis or inability to respond adequately or act at all. Second, many women experience a loss of voice or an inability to use language, either in the moment—to say no or to make requests—or to make sense of their experience later. Third, many women describe a feeling of shame, belittling, or humiliation after the fact.

Women’s descriptions of situations in which they could have resisted, but did not, often include an inability to act: in the moment they are unable to do anything *but* comply. In situations in which we might assume that women are choosing to behave in certain ways, the women themselves convey that they did not feel like they had any choice. Nancy Weber describes her “docility” in response to an instance of sexual harassment:

You would think I would have raised my fist to punch him in the chin . . . Instead I was paralyzed. I couldn’t tell my husband about it for two days. I was so distressed, not just by the ugliness of that moment but my inability to do anything useful about it. (La Ferla 2019)

One of Lynn Phillips’s subjects says, “He was so persistent, and I just sort of caved,” and another says, “I can’t really explain what my thinking was, because technically, I could have left” (Phillips 2000, 103). Breanne Fahs tells the story of Brynn, who drove into the desert with her boyfriend and ended up with injuries that required a trip to the hospital and ultimately caused infertility. Yet Brynn’s language is remarkably vague: “I kind of got into a situation I did not want to be in. I was handcuffed and put over the side of a jeep . . . we went from one thing to another to me being halfway over the back end of the jeep, handcuffed.” According to Fahs, “she blamed herself for the event, citing her lack of protest,” although she says it stopped being fun: “I was scared and wanted out of there, but it wasn’t rape” (Fahs 2011, 208). Feeling frightened and experiencing pain were not enough in the moment to enable her to protest.

Challenging the call for women to simply be more assertive, Gavey points out that some “women find themselves literally unable to act during sex with a man in any way that overtly attempts to take control of the situation or to change the course of events” (Gavey 2005, 122). Her subject Ann simply says, “it wouldn’t have occurred to me to say no” (142). In earlier research, Gavey notes “a degree of passivity that can be experienced by women as immobilizing” (145). The nature of the agency exercised in these situations is far from clear (and is the subject of future research). If the women are not physically coerced, their agency is not simply overridden, but there is a way in which it seems frozen in many cases. Regardless of how we theorize agency in these cases, one of their distinctive features is that women act *as if* they had less agency than they seem to have in the abstract, and they are often confused by that after the fact.

Closely related to this paralysis in the moment of domination is a kind of voicelessness: a difficulty in communicating either during or after the event. Phillips describes



loss of voice as a “great reluctance to voice their pain or misgivings, to tell partners what would give them pleasure, or to end an encounter before a man was ‘finished’” (Phillips 2000, 109). Gavey focuses more specifically on the difficulty of effectively saying no, pointing out that “refusals are, in fact, typically *not* accomplished through the bare linguistic act of saying ‘no’” (Gavey 2005, 145). This “absence of a language with which to say no” is exemplified by Ann, who explains that she did not have

the language to say it, and, and, and also I guess, feeling that if you said it, it would have any effect. Because there is always that fear that you could say no and it would carry on anyway, and, and, being physically less, and then you’d be raped sort of thing, and then it would be terrible. (157–58)

After the fact, a difficulty using language continues, but the challenge is no longer to communicate with the dominator but to make sense of what happened. Fahs puts it thus: “women often struggled to attach language to experiences that felt coercive but did not necessarily seem like *rape*” (Fahs 2011, 200) and claims that

women struggle to claim language about sexual violence when speaking to others. . . . [T]he struggle to make meaning of coercive experiences (and to *persist* in restructuring one’s sexuality following these events) appeared as a central dilemma in women’s worst sexual experience narratives. (201)

We can hear this struggle in the halting words of one of Gavey’s subjects:

Well I wasn’t raped, raped, because I did—I—See, I’ve never actually been raped, but I mean really it’s a fine line between saying yes, whether you want to or not, to somebody like that, that I didn’t really want to go to bed with. Ah, I’ve, I mean I suppose I’ve been (pause, sighing) sort of pushed around (pause) but, but not (pause) violently. . . . He, he didn’t rape me, because I really more or less consented. (Gavey 2005, 159)

Repeatedly, we hear that these women were unable to say no or protest *effectively*, and even after the fact, their speech lacks fluency and conveys a sense of themselves more as objects than subjects: “I kind of got into a situation”; “it would carry on anyway.”

A final theme that points to the distinctiveness of sexual domination is shame or feelings of humiliation. Women who describe these experiences often mention feeling generally belittled by the experience and specifically ashamed of their own cooperation with that treatment. Here again is Brynn: “I feel small, belittled by the fact that I knew that I didn’t want him to do that, and I allowed somebody to do that to me” (Fahs 2011, 208). Another of Fahs’s subjects said, “I felt scared, and I felt like he wanted to dominate me. . . . I guess I wasn’t a strong enough person to get up and leave. . . . I felt belittled” (209–10). Lastly: “I felt so embarrassed and disgusted and disappointed in myself that I allowed myself to be treated that way” (211). Shame and self-blame are well documented among women who have been raped. What may be distinctive here is the women’s belief that they really could have resisted effectively, but did not.

The empirical work of Phillips, Fahs, and Gavey on sexual domination is invaluable for developing academic insight and for mobilizing effective challenges to sexual domination. Their discursive approaches to power do much explanatory work, and I agree that a “Foucauldian discursive approach explains how a nexus of the dominant discourses on heterosex can constitute women’s sexual subjectivity in complex ways that



might result in the social production of ‘compliant’ subjects” (Gavey 2005, 150). However, an explanation of why women find themselves passive, voiceless, and compliant when no physical coercion is present *and* when they consciously do not want sex cannot only rely on discursive or productive power. We can and should consider the intrasubjective dynamics of women whose subjectivity has been constituted within what Fahs calls a culture of domination. But if we intend to hold dominators responsible, to enable people who have been dominated to make sense of their own compliance or inaction, or to understand the broader power dynamics in effect, we will need an intersubjective, embodied understanding of domination as well.

Specific instances of domination stand out against a background of culture or norms. They are part of the same picture, but women who critique patriarchal culture and norms still may comply in these moments of domination. For this reason, we need to name these experiences and recognize them as distinctive. The need for a specific concept of domination, distinct from both power and coercion, is highlighted by the conflict between these women’s narratives of self—who they say they want to be, who they believe they are, and what they value—and their actions. The inability to act and speak in response to the experience of domination suggests that such experiences are not seamless extensions of the women’s subjectivity, of their everyday expectations for self and others, or of their sense of what is normal. On the contrary, these experiences represent a departure from those things, even a violation of them. However power has constituted these women’s subjectivity, domination still feels disorienting, frightening, or at least uncomfortable. Fahs claims that their “conflicts about tolerating coercive experiences despite feeling that they deserved better—or tolerating exploitation despite a feminist belief system—revealed the disconnect between women’s internal narratives and the power they can exert in their sexual relationships” (Fahs 2011, 210). Kathy Miriam addresses such conflict in more general terms:

there are modes of experience . . . that not only can’t be expressed but that might sometimes conflict with one’s overt beliefs about the self and world. Evidence of this conflict can be a valuable source of insight into dimensions of social reality that would otherwise be masked, especially if we were to rely solely on people’s explicit beliefs as a source of knowledge. (Miriam 2007, 219)

When researchers ask women if it is acceptable for men to pressure women into sex, most of us say no. We say that women should stand up for ourselves or just walk away. Yet many of us behave otherwise in those moments. The tension between what seems so easy and obvious, and what often happens, suggests a “masked” dimension of social reality, which I am suggesting we call a kind of domination.

To fail to critique these dynamics, to claim that indeed these women were free to resist, or to suggest that perhaps they really wanted to be “dominated,” is to participate in a hermeneutic injustice (Jackson 2019). Domination is distinctive precisely in that it is so difficult to resist. That difficulty arises not only from the intrasubjective dynamics of the dominated, not only from the diffuse power relations represented by norms or culture, but from the intersubjective dynamics between dominator and dominated.

### Interpellation and Embodied Experience

The domination entailed in acquiescence to unwanted sex violates many women’s sense of who they are and their sense of what is normal. Power has doubtless constituted the

subjectivity of both the men and the women involved, but the experience of domination is distinct from ubiquitous, diffuse power relations. It is also distinct from coercion, which does not depend on our cooperation. How, then, does it happen?

Althusser's notion of interpellation begins to answer this question. He describes a process by which ideologies and subjects mutually constitute each other. Subjects respond to an ideology's call to be, think, and act in certain ways, and those responses reproduce the ideology. There is no pre-ideological subject, but Althusser leaves open the possibility that the subject can turn away from a specific hail and in so doing, undermine the ideology. His approach emphasizes ideology's production of "good" subjects, whose participation in the embodied practices that constitute ideology makes them appear complicit in their own oppression or domination. Applying Althusser to feminist concerns, Elizabeth Wingrove puts it thus: "femininity exists because individuals assume the proper positions and practices of 'women'" (Wingrove 1999, 883). Interpellation is perhaps best understood not as a general theory of power, but a more specific theory about how power shapes subjectivity. As such, it addresses the intersubjective and embodied aspects of power, highlighting asymmetry. These emphases on practices, the body, and inequality are useful if we want to understand domination.

Where Althusser's approach is especially useful is its attention to specific, embodied moments in which this mutual constitution occurs, not always between a subject and an abstract ideology, but between one person and another, possibly in a relationship of exploitation. The allegory of the policeman calling to a person in the street, "hey, you there!" is perhaps the most well-known element of Althusserian interpellation, and it is the most useful for thinking about sexual domination. This allegory represents an asymmetrical relation between persons, embodied in discrete moments and actions. It emphasizes that the subject responds to the hail in specific, intersubjective experiences without really knowing why and without guilt. The policeman hails the person, and the person turns. Why? How do they even know the policeman was calling to them? For Althusser, this process is mysterious: "it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings'" (Althusser 1971, 174). Althusser makes clear that the policeman case is a "special" one—not only because the subject seems to be a suspect, and the policeman implies a threat of violence, but also because it implies the production of the subject in that moment. But there is no subject prior to its interpellation: "in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (175). There is no subject outside of ideology, even before birth. Specific moments of interpellation—or practices—matter because without our response, the hail loses meaning. But we respond in those moments in the way we do in part because of prior interpellation. Althusser's approach thus brings together a view of power as diffuse, ubiquitous, and productive, with the potential for recognition of embodied forms of domination or exploitation.

For understanding sexual domination, the policeman image offers several useful elements: the embodied asymmetry of the policeman and the subject, their proximity in a specific place and time, the fear of violence, the pressure for the subject to turn, and the mysteriously cooperative, almost automatic response in that moment. Interpellation calls on the subject to behave in a certain way at a certain time, in response to a specific, social cue. Because practices are repeated in "rituals," we act without thinking. The policeman interacts with a specific subject; the subject knows she is seen and knows she is required to respond. It is the subject's response in the moment that completes

the practice, and her continued responsiveness over time that constitutes the ritual. Implied in the notion that these moments are interpellative is the possibility that our subjectivity is shaped over time not just by diffuse power relations, but also by discrete experiences of domination, in which our own participation completes the interaction.

To be clear, the policeman allegory, originating in 1970s France, should not be taken as implying a parallel between literal policing practices in the 2020s and the experiences of sexually dominated women. Althusser treats the policeman's implicit threat of violence as a relatively unimportant aspect of the encounter. For people in the US, especially for Black men and women, that threat is overwhelming (and hardly implicit). A limit to the metaphor is that today we might say of the policeman scenario that of course hailed subjects turn; they are afraid they will be shot if they do not. Meanwhile the puzzle for dominated women is their compliance in the *absence* of such a threat. It is important, then, to use the metaphor as only that, recognizing its limits.

Despite these limits, a key advantage of Althusser's approach is its insistence that embodied experience and action matter, in addition to discourse and belief. It thus has the potential to rescue a theory of power from what Matthew Lampert calls *theoreticism* and McNay calls *social weightlessness* (McNay 2014; Lampert 2015). In Althusser's terms, ideology cannot exist independently of practices. As Lampert puts it: "our conscious beliefs are irrelevant to the function of rituals . . . a ritual is followed *as if* those words were true, whether we believe them or not" (Lampert 2015, 129). This is key for thinking about sexual domination. In response to a man's immediate, embodied interpellation of a woman as sexually available or even merely attractive, she may behave *as if* she is sexually available to him, *as if* she is receptive, even though she would reject that notion in the abstract or with the benefit of time to think things over. If she is, in practice, unable to say no to someone trying to have sex with her, her belief that she is empowered is moot at best, a mystification at worst.

Considering sexual domination as functioning in part through interpellation also enables us to see these experiences as part of a larger ideological system, which otherwise might appear in abstract, disembodied terms. It offers a way to build on Hilkje Hänel's argument that rape is part of a holistic sexist ideology that is "constituted by ritualized social practices" and that "organizes us in relations of domination and submission" (Hänel 2018, 155). For Hänel, it is the ritualized nature of practices that lead us to participate in them: we lose sight of both their meaning and our own interests in the course of repeating them. If we are complicit it may be unconsciously, it may be easier to comply than resist, or it may be that sexist ideology gives us "reasons to act against [our] own self-interest" (157). What a specifically Althusserian approach adds is a focus on those moments when we are not just mindlessly repeating a familiar ritual: when we comply despite conscious discomfort. Its focus on the presence of an interpellating other hints at *why* saying no becomes so difficult.

Surely power does shape belief. But the phenomenon of acquiescence to unwanted sex suggests that many of us will cooperate with domination even when we believe we shouldn't. In those moments, we freeze and are mysteriously unable to speak or act. It is not that we have been duped into thinking we should comply. It is not that the subject engages in forms of self-harm that her mistaken beliefs tell her are beneficial. Instead, the subject engages in actions that she would tell herself *would be* harmful if someone else engaged in them, and that she may view as harmful to herself soon after they have occurred. If she justifies her (in)action after the fact, it is only because she has already completed it and feels the need to normalize it, gain control, or exercise some agency.

Something that may not be explicit in Althusser's original concept of interpellation but that begins to emerge in feminist adaptations of it is the possibility that both the dominator and the dominated are simultaneously interpellated and interpellating subjects. Domination is not simply something one person does to the other, where one is subject and the other object, but an asymmetrical relationship between them, in which both reproduce their subjectivity within a certain ideological frame or according to an ideological script, which defines each of them in relation to the other. In responding to the hail to be subordinate, the subject is also interpellating the other as dominant or authoritative. To see domination as a relationship is not to avoid assigning culpability or responsibility, but it is to see our actions as related and responsive to others' actions, rather than simply emerging from our own internal states or diffuse power relations. Focusing on interpellation does not assume a subject outside of power, but it does offer a way for thinking about our subjectivity as developing in response to the actions of specific persons throughout our lives. This is not to blame victims but to consider what Alcoff calls the intrinsic vulnerability of our sexual subjectivity (Alcoff 2018, 111).

Ideology constitutes subjects, but subjects, in responding to ideology's hail, constitute ideology as well. This gives us a somewhat more tangible way of thinking about the similar claim made by Foucault that power always entails the possibility of resistance, whereas domination leaves us stuck in frozen asymmetry. If we use Althusser's policeman as a metaphor for all dominators, we see resistance as *both* difficult *and* possible. As Mary Bunch puts it, the moment of interpellation or "interpellating scene is . . . pivotal to social change, as the central activating force of the internalisation of ideology, and the site where that ideology is refused" (Bunch 2013, 51). What *in that moment* could enable the subject to refuse—to decide not to "assume the proper positions and practices of 'women,'" in Wingrove's phrase?

For Althusser, interpellation is the means by which ideology produces "good subjects": subjects who are compliant, who "assume the proper positions," who sometimes enable their own exploitation. It may do so discursively but it also does so through action: practices and rituals. In the case of women, a key ritual is sexual domination, which persists even among women who believe that they are strong and empowered. But if sexual domination not only depends on a certain kind of feminine subject but is also itself interpellative, reproducing a certain kind of feminine subject, what does that subject look like?

### Dominated Subjects

Moments of sexual domination stand out from the flow of more diffuse power relations, but, for many women who have sex with men, they occur over and over again. The subject who is reproduced in any given moment of domination has already been produced by power, but domination has specific effects on the subjectivity of the dominated, and on her ability to develop her sexual subjectivity. When women turn toward that hail to cooperate sexually, they not only participate in the immediate act but also in the production of themselves as "good" subjects. But such subjects are not necessarily cheerfully compliant. Many of these women express confusion, conflict, or shame after the fact, and seem to experience a diminished sense of efficacy over their own sexual subjectivity.

We see a certain kind of shame over and over again in accounts of unwilling consent. Women feel disgusted or disappointed by *their own* behavior, saying things like "I guess I wasn't a strong enough person" to resist. They say that they feel belittled that "I

allowed somebody to do that to me.” There are many different ways of theorizing shame; here I refer to Sandra Bartky’s notion of shame as “a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy” and “affective attunement to the social environment” (Bartky 1990, 85). She argues that shame does not always reach the level of conscious belief and is *more* salient as a result: the “corrosive character” of shame lies “in part in the very failure of these feelings to attain to the status of belief” (95). We can consciously critique a discourse or a culture of domination that has inculcated us with certain beliefs, and we can replace them with feminist beliefs, but in the interpellating moment of domination, we may discover that we are not able to speak and act according to those conscious beliefs. And then we may hate ourselves for that helplessness. Lacking an understanding of *why* we complied, lacking a language for what happened when we complied, when we feel we can’t call it assault, we blame ourselves for our own perceived failure.

This dimension of shame is bad enough. Perhaps more insidious is a more meta-level loss of a sense of efficacy in determining who one is, or disruption in one’s relationship to oneself. The “good subject” produced by domination is also one who loses her sense of authorship over her own subjectivity: “I guess I wasn’t strong enough. . . .” The implication is, “I am not who I thought I was, or who I want to be.” As Bartky puts it: “what I *am*, what I am made to be. . . is not always up to me to determine: Here, how I am and how I appear to be to the other converge” (86). For Bartky this happens when a woman is merely viewed as sexual by another in an unexpected or unwelcome way. Building on this insight, Alcoff argues that not simply will, but *will-formation* should be our focus in assessing sexual violation. She points out that “[m]any victims. . . express shame and self-loathing and act in ways that damage their self-regard, as if they have lost a sense of their will” (Alcoff 2018, 141). The worst effects of our assenting to “offers” made “under conditions of injustice” may be the deterioration of “our relations with our self” (141).

Women who have been sexually dominated often struggle to make sense of what happened, perhaps because of this tension between who they thought they were and how they actually behaved. In other words, domination undermines people’s ability to act *as if* their subjectivity were their own. In terms of Seyla Benhabib’s narrative model, in which identity means “the capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together” (Benhabib 1999, 353), their process of identity-making is destabilized as they find it impossible to weave what has happened to them, and what they themselves have done, into their narrative of who they are. If “agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us” (344), and what matters is not the content of the story but “one’s ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and others” (347), domination seems to damage one’s ability to tell a coherent story. One thought one was telling one’s own story, but it turns out that not only the plot but also one’s character are being written by others. Where for Sharon Marcus the “horror of rape is not that it steals something from us but that it makes us into things to be taken” (Marcus 1992, 399), the horror of domination is that it demands that we act *as if* we are things to be taken, and we do, for reasons that are opaque to us.

The kind of domination that occurs in gray sex is perhaps not traumatic. Or maybe it is ambiguously traumatic, or only seen and felt as trauma after the fact, in a certain telling of the story. Nevertheless, domination may share with trauma the introduction of an incomprehensible element into one’s narrative of self. “My current view of trauma,” writes Brison, “is that it introduces a surd—a nonsensical entry—into the series of events in one’s life” (Brison 2002, 103). Brison writes of the need for the survivor to

see her own story as “permanently revisable” (111). The meanings of acquiescence to unwanted sex are often so ambiguous and confusing that, even though they may not be felt as traumatic, they may seem like nonsense elements in one’s narrative of self, calling for resolution through a reliance on the language of guilt and innocence, or a victim/agent dichotomy.

### Resistant Subjects

Calling acquiescence to unwanted sex “domination,” and understanding a little bit about how it functions as an asymmetrical relationship initiated by the dominator, is a start. But the real challenge lies in the process of learning how to turn away from the hail. If domination produces a self who is turned against herself in shame, and who has lost her sense of efficacy in writing her own narrative, we would seem to face a puzzle. Domination produces subjects whose capacity for resistance would seem to be profoundly undermined. Where a Foucauldian approach to power emphasizes the ubiquity of the potential for resistance, making resistance seem almost too easy, his approach to domination leaves no way out, making resistance seem impossible. Is he right after all, that dominated subjects are permanently stuck? From the empirical literature, we know that they are not.

In Althusser’s approach, there is the implication that the subject can refuse or ignore the hail. Marcus explicitly calls on women to recognize and reject the rape script, including the notion that rape is a fate worse than death. Bunch emphasizes the possibility of resistance in writing about trans women hiding from police rather than answering them, and in pointing out that these embodied, interpellating moments are the moments in which we need to resist.

Perhaps doing so requires some kind of transformation before we face a fresh interpellating moment. We know such transformation is possible from the story of Ann. She had described a previous experience by saying “it wouldn’t have occurred to me to say no” and “there is always that fear that you could say no and it would carry on anyway.” She has shifted to the following attitude:

If it happened now . . . I would be a lot stronger . . . I would say “Fuck off.” . . . I can imagine I could get raped now, but I would *really* fight it. I’d just fight it every, every—I mean I’d physically fight it much harder. I mean I really would. I wouldn’t just go rigid and say nothing . . . if that happened I, I would have done anything, pinched him, bitten him, scratched him, scraped him, anything. And if it still had happened, I would have pressed charges, you know, I would have, yeah. And I guess part of that in a way, by resisting so strongly it would have built it up to the point which I, then made it easier to conceptualize as rape. (Gavey 2005, 163)

Ann has reclaimed her authorship of her own narrative, and is using it to imagine what she would do if someone tried to rape her. If he did, she is imagining that her life, her subjectivity, would go on, and she would press charges. She will always be subject to power, and she might be coerced, but she will not be dominated.

There is a popular feminism that interpellates women as strong and in charge, paralleled by an academic feminism that interpellates women as agents. These are preferable to an interpellation of women as potential victims who are always in need of special protection, able to wield no more formidable weapon than a set of keys. In the US this victim interpellation has always been racialized (Crenshaw 1991), often appearing



alongside an image of white women's innocence. But in the absence of further efforts to understand what enables women to *act* strong, and to resist acting as if we must comply, the claim that women *are* strong risks merely denying vulnerability rather than empowering. For women of color, often interpellated as invulnerable (hooks 1984; Oluo 2018), and for white women, often interpellated as vulnerable, something more than denial of vulnerability is needed. Similarly, calls on women to simply assert ourselves miss the point. The effectiveness of the interpellating moment is such that we cannot *simply* assert ourselves. We need to understand better why not—what the “mysterious” aspect of the interpellative pressure is—and what enables women like Ann to reach the point of saying “I would *really* fight it.”

Domination functions by eliciting a cooperative response in a specific moment, not (only) through discursive power, and not (directly) through brute force. Although women often do perform sexual availability in response to discursive power, in moments of domination the cooperative response violates the subject's conscious sense of who she is (or wants to be), and violates her sense of normalcy. And though women's sexual attitudes and behaviors are shaped by the ever-present threat of violence, the other distinctive aspect of domination is that it does not require threats to elicit cooperation or passivity.

Patriarchal domination consists in more than these specific moments in which women find themselves unable to resist sexual pressure. However, these experiences are so common, and have such profound effects on the subjectivity of the women who experience them, that they bear a closer look. Upon such a closer look we see that the theories of power that are most frequently applied to them do not quite fit, and may not help women who have had these experiences make sense of them. Diffuse power relations are clearly at play, but don't entirely capture the tension between what women believe and what we do. Yet that tension itself is part of what makes the experience of domination so important: it elicits our compliance in violation of our own sense of who we are, and then turns us against ourselves as we try to make sense of that violation. In domination, we are neither simply victims nor simply agents; we are both, and both our victimization and our agency are complex. The vulnerability of our sexual subjectivity may lie, in part, in that complexity.

**Acknowledgments.** Many thanks to *Hypatia's* anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions strengthened this article immeasurably. This work was supported in part by a professional development grant from the University of Northern Iowa.

## Notes

1 I initially came to this research not as a scholar but because of my own experiences of “gray sex” or unwilling consent, and as a mentor to undergraduate women who had also experienced “rapey” or ambiguous sex. I was struck by how many young, smart, feminist women, who seemed to live more liberated forms of sexual subjectivity than previous generations had, told stories in which sexual compliance with men was, as one of them told me, “easier than saying no.” I was also struck that these women identified as straight, bisexual, pansexual, and lesbian; Black, white, Asian, and biracial. More work needs to be done to explore the intersectionality of gray sex, particularly in the experiences of women of color and of trans women, but thus far all evidence suggests that it is very common in the US and that it crosses generational, racial, and ethical boundaries. See, for example, Phillips 2000; Rose 2003; Gavey 2005; Fahs 2011; Bell 2013; and Orenstein 2016.

2 Although this piece uses the phrase “gray sex” as shorthand for referring to the range of heterosexual experiences this work addresses, I recognize that our perceptions of our own experiences may change over time, so that what looked ambiguous at one point may look like rape at a later time, and vice



versa. Moreover, outside observers are likely to call many of these cases rape or assault. My use of the term *sex* is not intended to exonerate the men in question or to assume the presence of just power relations. With MacKinnon and many others, I see rape and sex as occupying a continuum. But since I want to focus on those experiences that don't quite seem to be rape *to the women who experience them*, my emphasis is on the "gray" or ambiguous nature of these experiences so as not to beg too many conceptual questions.

3 Allen sees Judith Butler's work as a corrective to this (Allen 2015), but I disagree. A thorough analysis of Butler's work on power and the subject is beyond the scope of this piece, but as will become clear when I turn to Althusser, I do not share Butler's Lacanian reading of the hailed subject turning to the police officer due to either anticipation of benefit or guilt (Butler 1997). See Davis 2012.

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