

# MANAGING EDITORS' CLUSTER INTRODUCTION: THE EXPANSIVE RANGE OF MISOGYNISTIC BEHAVIORS

# A Continuum of Women's Agency under Misogyny

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Manifestations of misogyny have proliferated over time, reshaping and diversifying in response to increasing gender inclusivity and the progression of women's rights. Although some forms of gender-based exploitation are painfully blatant and obviously express a sexist ideology, other forms are more ambiguous, hiding in the collective shadows of the masculinist psyche and public discourse. These *covert* forms of misogyny are not necessarily less devastating to those who experience them than are the more widely recognized *overt* forms, especially when they occur within intimate relationships. Indeed, their very elusiveness leaves victims prone to torturous self-doubt, threatening their confidence and self-trust and corroding their agency. Within romantic or intimate relationships, even subtle misogyny contravenes the mutual respect and vulnerability that loving intimacy requires.

The articles in this cluster illuminate moments on a continuum of misogyny in the context of relationships, from overt, consciously sexist, and violent expressions to covert, sometimes indeliberate expressions. They also highlight the ambiguities and ambivalences at play in at least some of its manifestations. Our hope is that entertaining the notion of a continuum of misogyny can illuminate some of its subtle behavioral expressions, while contributing to a growing understanding of its logic. This may clarify the affective dissonance that agents experience when they sense, yet doubt, that they are experiencing misogyny. The articles in this cluster, and the analysis we offer here, is part of a larger attempt in contemporary feminist theory to demystify the bewilderingly expansive range of misogynistic behavior by identifying, naming, and making sense of its novel or previously obscured expressions to pave the way for healthier and more ethical relationships.

Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* offers a novel and ameliorative structure for understanding and responding to misogyny, one that helps to frame the articles in this cluster. Of particular use are Manne's distinction between sexism and misogyny, and her insistence that misogyny need not involve the hatred of women. Manne understands sexism as "the branch of patriarchal ideology that justifies and rationalizes a patriarchal social order" (Manne 2018, 20). Misogyny, by contrast, is "the system that polices and enforces its governing norms and expectations" (20). Manne's characterization of misogyny contrasts with the popular notion that it is primarily a property of hate-filled individuals, who are hostile to any and every woman (32). As such, it represents an important contribution to the feminist project of decoding misogyny because it better explains lived experience (31).

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Manne also elaborates the crucial relationship between misogyny and masculine entitlement. Entitlement involves a sense of who-owes-what-to-whom. Social norms both produce and rationalize cis men's sense of entitlement to "masculine-coded perks and privileges" such as women's time, reproductive labor, and emotional and sexual attention (130). A sense of unfairness or injustice follows when one is denied what they believe they are owed. The culturally ingrained understanding that one is denied their rightful claims as a man links sexist ideology to masculine identity. This is why women and girls may be accused of emasculation when they withhold the goods and services that sexism indicates they are under obligation to provide. Some men feel justified in retaliating when they believe women owe them an unpaid debt and have thereby humiliated them.

The sexism that bolsters and explains misogyny is inseparable from a belief in the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality. Thus it is unsurprising that misogyny is acute in heteronormative relationships. In this introduction, we sometimes focus specifically on relationships between cisgender men and women because this is the paradigmatic relationship for misogynists. The spectrum of misogyny in these relationships includes a range in how women's agency is perceived, experienced, and in some cases denied, dismissed, or annexed by cis heterosexual men. There is corresponding variety in heterosexual women's consciousness of, and sense of claim to, their own agency. At one extreme are men who perceive women as de facto objects lacking meaningful agency. This perception aligns with some cis men's hyperbolic sense of superiority and is buttressed by extreme sexist beliefs. At this end, women's agency may not be tolerated even when it serves men's objectives (such as white supremacy and financial gain), because it runs counter to their dominance. At the other end are people of all gender identities (including those who are gender neutral) who disavow sexist norms and whose interactions reflect respect for mutual and relational agency. The ameliorative work of feminism is, in part, to nudge social norms toward the latter and advance a social organization in which reciprocal respect and vulnerability are both possible and wise for all agents.

We present the articles in this cluster as points of analysis on this continuum from covert to overt misogyny. Employing Manne's logic to different degrees, we see how entitlement, sexism, and misogyny intertwine in specific contexts. We offer the additional analysis of gendered agency as perceived and experienced, as well as how autonomy arises, contrary to sexist ideology, from vulnerability and interdependency. In the examples provided by the authors herein, the pure autonomy that so many misogynists aspire to through dominance is revealed as self-defeating, nihilistic, and at times suicidal.

## Overt Misogyny and Frustrated Agency

In Tracy Llanera's "The Misogyny Paradox and the Alt-Right," we see some clear examples of overt misogyny. The recruitment pitches of the alt-right often include explicit appeals to masculine entitlement: "you were owed something, or your life should have been X, but because of the ridiculous things feminists are doing, you can't access them" (as quoted in Llanera, 1). In addition, these groups, which include white supremacists, rely on the control of women's bodies to achieve their objectives. White women are needed to make white babies, to ensure that white people are not outnumbered in a "white genocide." This presents a double-edged status to women members since they hold a politically vital, even sacred, status within a logic that dictates that women are

to be used for their sexual and reproductive capacities. Alt-right women aspire to the ideals of women in racist propaganda, including the white goddess/victim and the wife/mother, who both lack independent agency. They are depicted as desirable victims in need of protection from outsiders, and/or they are sequestered in the home raising children. One exemplar of the latter "tradwife" paradigm of femininity, Ayla Stewart, challenged white women to have as many or more than her six babies.

In response to dutifully fulfilling their roles within the movement, alt-right women expect to be treated well. Although they are inferior to white men, they believe themselves superior to everyone else. As Llanera writes, they see "their whiteness as a source... of dignity and... self-esteem on account of their presumed higher status over other groups of people" (Llanera, 160). However, even "good" racist girls, those who behave in a subordinate manner, are preyed upon, humiliated, and treated like property by men within the movement (169). They are surprised by their mistreatment, "feeling baffled and disappointed to receive disrespect, abuse, and hostility instead of getting social approval for their submission" (171). Llanera notes that, ironically, "racist women today *expect* to be treated like subjects" and therefore acknowledged for their willing support of the movement (171).

The frustrated attempts of white-supremacist women to find respect through conformity is even more stark in the case of those who are white-power activists. Even though in these circles, the female activist archetype is depicted as a husband's helpmate, functioning in service to shared causes, she demonstrates agency and has a life outside the domestic realm. Llanera notes that the work of these women affords them "masculine coded goods," such as public attention and financial gain (Manne 2018). However, even when the women are dedicated to racist and sexist rhetoric, men's hostility is vociferous, public, and explicit against them. For instance, "white power Barbie" Lauren Southern creates makeup tutorials and similar videos that turn into racist or antifeminist rants or conspiracy theories. Although this is an effective recruitment strategy, her public acclaim also results in reprisals, including rape threats, stalking, verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances, and other violence by members of the alt-right and by others (163, 166). Southern's demonstrations of agency and her acquisition of "masculine coded goods" are considered deeply offensive within the movement, regardless of whether her efforts serve its ends.

#### Women as Ambivalent Agents

Cases of misogyny that are especially difficult to parse may involve systems of apparently contradictory, overlapping, or competing sets of beliefs. In "What Do Incels Want? Explaining Incel Violence Using Beauvoirian Otherness," Filipa Melo Lopes explains one such case. Melo Lopes examines the ambivalent attitudes toward women of incels ("involuntary celibates") such as Elliot Rodger. Rodger, for example, calls conventionally attractive, sexualized women alternately "goddesses" and "evil, slutty bitches" (as quoted in Melo Lopes, 136). He is both attracted to and wants to annihilate them. What is the paradoxical logic at work here?

Drawing on Beauvoir's notion of woman as the Other from whom men seek recognition, Melo Lopes writes, "these self-alienated men are trapped in a disappointing 'game' in their relationship with women (Beauvoir 2011, 201; 208). In this game, woman as Other must act aloof. The man must then 'tame' her not into subjugation, but into a willing adoration" (142). Melo Lopes notes that Rodger wanted to be viewed as a great man in the eyes of a blonde woman: to be *chosen*. According to Melo Lopes,

this is not simply a matter of objectification or of women's supposed complete lack of agency, which would imply that women lack "characteristically human capacities, like the capacity to choose, to have a subjective point of view, or to have complex emotions" (136). She also asserts that it is not mere entitlement that motivates incels, which would mean that they wish to punish women for their pretensions to equality since incels are not targeting women who are most clearly struggling for equality, such as feminists (137). Instead, the incel seeks to be validated by the "hot, beautiful blonde" when she *freely* chooses to love and admire him (138). Like Melo Lopes, Ann Cahill points out that not all misogyny denies women's agency; sometimes it punishes agency that is viewed as misdirected via a practice that Cahill terms *derivatizing*. In *Overcoming Objectification*, Cahill explains that to derivatize is "to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc." (Cahill 2011, 32). The instances Melo Lopes describes seem to involve derivatization founded on a misogynistic belief that women's agency should serve men's needs.

In Rodger's case, when women fail to notice him, they become beasts, animals, enemies, "the ultimate evil behind sexuality" (as quoted in Melo Lopes, 147). They become responsible for his status as a fallen god. As a result, he wants to obliterate their subject status, including their ability to evaluate him, to have feelings about him, to love him or not to love him. In essence, their agency has not served his ends, so they must be exterminated. Melo Lopes describes this as an attempt to escape ambiguity through control. Without women's appraisal, the incel can return to his imagined position of being *both* subject and object, becoming a pure, sovereign subject. Melo Lopes writes: sovereign subjects "see themselves as *only* subjects in the world, unconstrained by facts about who they are, what they have done, or what their bodies are like" (139).

Whereas patriarchal white supremacists punish women for any expression of agency, regardless of whether it serves their own ends, incels depend on women's agency, but only in a very narrow and narcissistic sense: it must serve their ends. The ambivalence of incels overlaps with overt alt-right racist misogyny in that they share the same ideals of women as goddesses, Barbies, and wives/girlfriends. However, when rejected, incels may resolve to destroy women's agency through extermination. Although casual misogyny and punishment are manifest in the alt-right, annihilation doesn't seem to be a threat. Perhaps where there is less ambivalence about women's agency, there is less belief in women's power. If women are considered more object-like, it follows that they would be easier to control and therefore less menacing. Regardless, both stances land in a position of denying women's agency by favoring a sense of masculine sovereignty.

### Women's Fragile Agency

In "Sexual Refusal: The Fragility of Women's Experiences," Elinor Mason explains how even when women are believed to have agency, in certain circumstances it can be easily discredited. For example, she considers cases of sexual assault involving "authority silencing," in which women are not believed to have the authority to refuse sexual activity (McGowan 2009). Mason distinguishes these from instances in which a man misunderstands refusal (such as when he thinks that "no" means "yes") and those in which a man coerces a woman or overrides her refusal to have sex. Mason explains that, because de facto authority (in contrast to institutional or moral authority) is derived from social norms, women's authority to refuse sex is fragile. For instance, marital rape remains

legal in most countries, and only became illegal in all fifty United States in 1993. In too many cases, once married, women's agency is annexed, subsumed into their husbands'. Victim-blaming also remains prevalent. Surveys and other research indicate that if a woman dresses a certain way, has had a previous sexual relationship with a man, or drinks alcohol on the date in question, then judges, juries, and survey respondents are more likely to believe that an assault is her fault, and that a more lenient consequence is appropriate for the assailant. Through her own actions, her authority to refuse sex is deemed to be diminished, if not completely nullified. Agency that can erode so suddenly and dramatically is fragile indeed. Making matters worse, as Mason points out, "societal norms around heterosexual sex make various degrees of forcible seduction seem an acceptable part of heteronormative interaction" (114).

Mason notes that there are many ambiguous cases of women's frayed authority on the "heteronormative continuum" (Cahill 2014, 303) between consensual sex and sexual assault" (Mason, 114). She makes the important point that "someone who takes lack of authority to be decisive in the sexual refusal case is blameworthy for that" (117). In other words, sexual consent should not even be a matter of *authority*: whether someone wants to have sex should be enough reason for them to refuse. However, even this standard does not erase all ambiguity. Women are trained to follow norms of politeness, and in some cases, women may rely on "good manners" to help protect them from men's aggression. Such norms can be coercive on their own, reshaping or overriding a woman's own desires. This intimidation might arise in a woman as "a vague feeling that refusal is not an option, and [her] not be[ing] able to identify why" (129). The woman may find "herself engaging in the argument, negotiating, as if she has no authority, and feeling something amiss but not being clear about what" (129).

Discussing related experiences in "Recognition, Desire, and Unjust Sex," Cahill describes how women sometimes let sex happen because they don't know how to stop it or don't feel entitled to. Women's sexual desire is thus reduced to "a kind of bartering tool that has value only to the extent to which it aligns with male desire.... Heterosexual women are encouraged to view their sexuality not as a good in and of itself, but rather as something that can be traded for other goods (intimacy, economic security, heterosexual privilege)" (308). Considered in this light, sex cannot be unambiguously refused or initiated by women. In a sense, a woman gave consent *in absentia*, when she got married or when she took a drink earlier in the evening. At best, her agency is oblique, as when sex is traded for money or security. With a view of women's desire as so muddled in the first place, sexist ideology grants it little to no direct authority.

Cahill claims that it is not just the presence of an individual's sexual desire that makes consent relevant, but also the meaningful recognition of sexual desire communicated between partners. As Katherine Angel writes in *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again*:

Our desires emerge in interaction; we don't always know what we want; sometimes we discover things we didn't know we wanted; we discover what we want only in the doing. This—that we don't always know and can't always say what we want—must be folded into the ethics of sex rather than swept aside as an inconvenience.

. . Desire is uncertain and unfolding, and this is unsettling. (Angel 2021, 38-39)

Angel argues that we place too much pressure on women's complete self-possession for their sexual safety: "We pit self-knowledge against repression—self-transparency against

darkness" (92). Yet Cahill and Mason strongly demonstrate why it is often unwise for women to be vulnerable in intimate relationships. Where sexual refusal is likely to be ignored and denied, one can't reasonably afford to risk sexual safety in hopes of enjoying the subtle discovery of self and other.

#### **Hermeneutic Labor and Taxed Agency**

In Ellie Anderson's "Hermeneutic Labor: The Gendered Burden of Interpretation in Intimate Relationships between Women and Men," we do not see women's agency denied so much as taken advantage of and ultimately diminished through exploitation. In the tradition of Arlie Hochschild's account of emotional labor in *The Managed Heart* (Hochschild 1983), feminist discourses on affective labor have shown how "women are tasked with being the container for the emotions of others in both public and private spaces" (Anderson, 178). Anderson describes how heterosexual women often become "relationship-maintenance experts who offer unreciprocated hermeneutic labor unskilled in interpreting emotions" (178). As a distinct form of emotional labor, *hermeneutic labor* is "the burdensome activity of: understanding and coherently expressing one's own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations; discerning those of others; and inventing solutions for relational issues arising from interpersonal tensions" (178). When men feel entitled to this labor, they expect or demand the benefits they derive from it, such as the maintenance of the relationship itself.

Anderson notes the paradox that even though hermeneutic labor demands women's imagination and cognitive and emotional intelligence, it disempowers women, reinforcing stereotypes of women's passivity (185). Hermeneutic labor is emotionally, physically, and intellectually exhausting. Through its exploitation, women stand to lose their "epistemic and ethical integrity, as well as their potential for well-being" (183). The exploitation of hermeneutic labor decenters women's perspective, potentially leading to a state of existential anxiety that Caroline Lundquist equates with *zozobra* consciousness:

As an existential mood, zozobra is a state of dizziness and confusion brought about by the destabilization of our reality; a state in which we toggle endlessly between competing perspectives. As Francisco Gallegos and Carlos Alberto Sánchez write, zozobra is "the peculiar form of anxiety that comes from being unable to settle into a single point of view." (Lundquist 2022, 256; Gallagos and Sánchez 2020)

Persistently torn between the conscious conviction that *everything is normal* (since the exploitation of women's labor *is* normal under a system of misogyny), and the insistent feeling that *something is wrong, zozobra* consciousness can leave women emotionally exhausted. Understandably, and as Anderson points out, the exploitation of hermeneutic labor can lead to obsessive rumination, anxiety, and depression (193).

Why do women voluntarily engage in this inadvisable enterprise? Anderson reminds us that the exploitation of women's hermeneutic labor "stems from, and is reinforced by, pervasive gender asymmetries" that are entangled with other powerful cultural norms (Anderson, 183). As she explains, most people are simply not aware of this dynamic because this labor is hidden—so deeply embedded into our culture as to be considered part of the natural order. Moreover, it generally goes unremunerated and unrecognized because, in addition to being essential, it is supposed to be natural and fulfilling for women (192). As Lundquist points out, even where women are conscious that our hermeneutic labor is being exploited, the existential exhaustion born of *zozobra* 

"urges us to settle into the perspective that requires the least resistance, which is usually the perspective that tells us that the devaluation of our time and preferences is normal and natural or the best we can hope for" (Lundquist 2022, 256).

Although when recognized it is often denigrated, hermeneutic labor is also and importantly an expression of women's talents and intelligence, and, often, an attempt to get men to see women's point of view, no matter how futile the effort may sometimes be. It can also include educating men about sexist and misogynist dynamics. Thus feminist heterosexual women may find themselves additionally tasked with discerning where their hermeneutic labor falls on the continuum of misogyny, and how their agency is being taxed by the hermeneutic labor involved in making such a determination.

The social norms surrounding hetero relations compromise women's agency; hence they often do and certainly should feel wrong when actualized within relationships. We should not take our standards for relationships from social norms that may be as problematic as they are settled, and this certainly applies to our standards for sexual relationships. Citing Linda Martín Alcoff (Alcoff 2018), Shannon Hoff reminds us that "we should not necessarily take from what is socially sanctioned our standards for healthy, acceptable, legitimate sex" (Hoff, x).

#### The Evasion and Denial of Ambiguous Agency

The ambiguity that characterizes covert misogyny is dangerous because, as we have suggested, it makes covert expressions of misogyny more elusive, which in turn enables them to persist within and damage loving relations. But other kinds of ambiguity within intimate relationships are, as Hoff reminds us, conducive if not *essential* to genuine and meaningful connection. In such cases, misogyny may be expressed via the evasion or denial of ambiguity. In "Intimate Exposure: A Feminist Phenomenology of Sexual Experience and Sexual Suppression," Hoff describes this evasion and denial in the context of sex.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Hoff characterizes sexual experience as "a domain not of detached, individual autonomy but of intrinsic susceptibility and exposure to the world" (198). Key to grasping this are understanding the ambiguities of the flesh as described by Merleau-Ponty, including the intertwining ambiguities of "materiality and meaning, self and others, and self and world" (198). Self-consciousness and autonomy arise only from first experiencing the intimacy and vulnerability of fleshly engagement, perhaps even enmeshment, with the world. This is an intrinsically ambiguous state of being in which we find ourselves as one with the material of the world and with other bodies yet has the potential to develop a reflective distance. According to Merleau-Ponty, sexual desire is neither merely emotional nor material, but rather the desire of a body animated by a consciousness, or of "the *body* as the site of an *attitude*" (Hoff, 202, emphasis in original). One's own body similarly manifests as both material and meaningful in its sexual responsivity.

Hoff describes prevalent attempts to control, withdraw from, conceal, and suppress the ambiguities of sexual experience, emphasizing two stereotypical and gendered ways in which they are evaded: women's self-protective "withdrawal from" and men's misogynistic "control of" sexuality as flesh (198). Both stances fail to embrace the ambiguity of flesh, compromising agents' existential freedom understood as "our very capacity to remain open to the bodies of others, and to have their possibilities, their capacities for transcendence, resonate within our experience" (207). Hoff writes, "In each stance, we

see a separation of body and will—will in charge of bodies, or will acquiescing or 'giving over' the body as object" (207).

Hoff emphasizes that sexual and other norms are used to exercise control, diminishing women's agency: "The agency of women... has often been curtailed in sexual interaction with men. Historically, the man's role and agency has been privileged over the woman's, such that she does not experience the expansion of her freedom in their interaction" (206). Instead, what has been desired from women "is self-subordination" (206). This suppression often takes the form of what Cahill terms "derivatization," through which "one person is derivative of another, reduced to a reflection of their needs and desires" (206; Cahill 2011). Today, women experience ambivalent sexual authority because of internalized norms such as the need to be polite. But with sexual expression as with hermeneutic labor, women who take on the dominant misogynist perspective compromise their agency and risk suffering exploitation in the process. As with women who aim to belong within the alt-right movement, here again adopting the dominant misogynist perspective traps women within a dangerous paradox: "Women are pressed to make themselves alluring objects, and if they encounter sexual aggression, they can be blamed for having made themselves alluring" (206).

Cautioning that, although well-intentioned, dominant notions of consent may reify the "learned stances of defensive withdrawal and control," Hoff asks us to allow ambiguity "to take root in our interaction" and honor "the ambiguity that sexuality brings with it" as a significant site of meaningful agency (213).

#### Dissolving Misogyny and Liberating Agency: A Collective Ameliorative Project

The most unsettling experiences are often those that are deeply felt yet, because they are nameless, are difficult or impossible to articulate even to ourselves. More unsettling still is the internal tension born of the clash between our felt sense that *something is wrong* and the norms and discourses that assure us that *everything is normal*. Such is the tension of living as a woman under a system of often-covert misogyny. When the status quo is experienced as both normal and wrong, the ensuing internal tensions create psychic stresses and strains that leave agents more vulnerable to harmful experiences like self-silencing and gaslighting that are, once again, both normal and wrong.

We hope that the articles in this cluster shed new light on the logic and ethical significance of misogyny, and especially on its more novel and bewildering forms and. We hope that the work of noticing, naming, understanding, assessing, and condemning the bewildering range of misogyny will continue until the need for it ceases to exist. We acknowledge that this work often begins subjectively, in deliberately extended moments of courageous discomfort with the status quo, and in moments of reflection on the ethical and existential meaning of that discomfort. But this work is also collective; its success requires nothing less than a seismic shift in our collective norms. We long and aim for a future in which women are liberated from the unsettled consciousness of misogyny, and in which people of all gender identities may enjoy mutual vulnerability and maximally meaningful agency within their relationships.

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1 Drawing on Rodney Coates and Janet Morrison's use of the neologism *covert racism*, Lundquist advocates use of the term *covert misogyny* "because it highlights the institutionally enabled, often-deliberate *hiddenness* of the behaviors involved. As is the case with covert racism, the plausible deniability of covert misogyny 'benefits perpetrators by allowing them to deny responsibility and culpability while

simultaneously undermining its victim's ability to claim damage(s)' (Coates and Morrison 2011, 2). Covert misogyny, like overt domestic abuse, involves tactics like coercion and gas-lighting that aim to compel victims to question or dismiss their felt sense that wrongdoing has occurred" (Lundquist 2022, 268).

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