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# Intimate Exposure: A Feminist Phenomenology of Sexual Experience and Sexual Suppression

Shannon Hoff 

Department of Philosophy, Memorial University, 230 Elizabeth Ave., St. John's, NL, Canada  
Corresponding author: [shoff@mun.ca](mailto:shoff@mun.ca)

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## Abstract

Accounts of sexual experience, sexual oppression, and sexual violation, if they are not to lend support to the problems they are invoked to address, require the foundation of a phenomenological description of the character of experience. Relying on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I aim to provide this foundation, arguing that sexual experience is a domain not of detached, individual autonomy but of intrinsic susceptibility and exposure to the world. My description of sexual experience is intended to reveal the immanent norms that sexuality projects and thereby to critique ways of inhabiting experience that disavow what is revealed in that description. The first section discerns three ambiguities that characterize our experience in Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh": that between materiality and meaning, self and others, and self and world. The second section offers a phenomenology of sexual experience based on these ambiguities. The third section, on sexual oppression and suppression, identifies two stereotypical ways in which they are evaded: what I call the stances of "withdrawal from" and "control of" sexuality as flesh. Finally, the fourth section reveals the shortcomings of the legal-judicial domain in navigating our status as flesh, and warns against the proliferation of its terms, specifically the norm of consent.

Addressing the problem of sexual oppression and sexual violation has been a significant part of feminist projects. This is a challenging project, however, for sexuality is not a transparent phenomenon and, as Linda Martín Alcoff argues (Alcoff 2018), we should not necessarily take from what is socially sanctioned our standards for healthy, acceptable, legitimate sex, or of sexual coercion, assault, and rape. To address the problems of sexual life well, then, we must first develop a sound understanding of just what sexual experience *is*. Phenomenology, insofar as it is dedicated to the careful description of the forms our experience takes, is particularly well-equipped to contribute to this feminist project. By turning to the description of our experience and using a phenomenological approach, we can be more successful at avoiding what other responses to sexual oppression and violation may not be able to avoid, namely, manifesting, reflecting, and perpetuating unacknowledged prejudices that reproduce the very problems they are invoked to address.<sup>1</sup>

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Beyond the value of its *method*, the historical practice of phenomenology has also yielded a specific (and related) *claim* about our experience that is of particular relevance to the feminist engagement with sexuality: phenomenology maintains that, *as an experiencing being*, the human being is not an independent subject standing over against, reflecting on, and willing autonomous engagement with reality, but is, rather, inseparably embedded in it. This notion, which I will explicate in relation to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh," effectively recontextualizes what is often decontextualized by philosophical thinking, arguing against the notion of an autonomous, individual mind defined in independence of its body, others, and its world. The idea that our experience does not unfold solely in obedience to our commands but is from the beginning as it were infiltrated by the world and others should impact our understanding of the character of sexual experience and, with it, our sense of what is actually needed in order to address the problems of violation and oppression.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, an account of sexual experience, sexual oppression, and sexual violation requires the foundation of a grounding, phenomenological description of the character of experience.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as Merleau-Ponty's particular focus is the body's role in this "primary pact with the world" (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 168), his analysis is particularly important for analysis of sexual experience. This article is motivated by the sense that this pact between body and world has a profound sexual significance: if experience is not fundamentally a matter of a "subject" encountering a world of "objects," but a matter of "flesh" shared by body and world, then sexual experience, as a bodily matter, must be a domain not of detached, individual autonomy, but of intrinsic susceptibility and exposure to what is happening around us, as it is a matter of our ability to experience the bodies and meanings of others operating within the operation of our own bodies. Supporting sexual well-being will require, as I will show, that we reckon with the idea that the "reflective I" is not quite "in the driver's seat" sexually.<sup>4</sup> Developing an approach to the problems arising in the sexual domain must begin by coming to terms with the ambiguities connected to our status as flesh.

Following contemporary philosophers, I will argue that we cannot presume that we experience sexual interaction as fundamentally separate beings, or that sexual violation and oppression are effectively opposed by the assertion of bodily independence (see Diprose 2002; Salamon 2010; Cahill 2011; Alcoff 2018; and Anderson 2022). If new possibilities for existing, as Rosalyn Diprose suggests, are open to me through the ambiguity of bodily existence, then freedom is compromised rather than guaranteed by keeping my body to myself (Diprose 2002, 54). This project employs Merleau-Ponty in a spirit similar to that animating Diprose, teasing out three different expressions of ambiguity from the notion of flesh that are central to sexual experience: 1) the ambiguity of matter and meaning, in terms of which the sexual body is indiscernibly material and intelligent; 2) the ambiguity of self and others captured in his characterization of the body as "hollow" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 151); and 3) the ambiguity of self and world in terms of which we see that the "parts" relevant to sexual experience operate in relation to a "whole" that is beyond the body, a sexual "field" (22) in which circulate sexual meanings not our own.<sup>5</sup>

The first section of the article introduces Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh, and the second section analyzes the relevance for sexual experience of the three ambiguities intrinsic to the reality of flesh. The third section, on sexual oppression and sexual suppression, identifies two stereotypical ways these ambiguities central to sexual experience are evaded: what I will call the stance of "withdrawal" from sexuality as flesh and the stance of "control" of sexuality as flesh. Associated with stereotypically feminine and

masculine behavior, these are two kinds of temptations that have become salient within a specific history of sexist and heterosexist oppression, and that do not live up to the character of experience illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh. In the fourth and final section, I diagnose the inadequacy of some ways of responding to problems of oppression and violation in the sexual sphere by relying on the juridical model of "consent." Overall, my phenomenological description of sexual experience is intended to reveal the *immanent* norms that sexuality projects and thereby to critique ways of inhabiting experience that deny or disavow what is revealed in that description.<sup>6</sup>

### Flesh and Its Ambiguities

Merleau-Ponty offers the term "perceptual faith" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 3) to show how we operate for the most part through a prereflective certainty of the world's solid presence, our experience unfolding in its embrace, in open rapport with it, guided as much by it as by "ourselves."<sup>7</sup> *There is and has been* an intimacy with the world, an intimacy out of which our explicit, self-conscious reflection emerges. In this already established relation, our lives have already been intertwined with others, our bodies have already been intertwined with the visible and the tangible, our perceptual field intersects with those of others (49). Bringing this prereflective experience to speech, we can say that there is a "thing perceived and an openness upon it" (38), where we cannot determine "if it is the look or if it is the things that command" (133). The one who sees is *of* the visible; the one who touches is *of* the tangible (134–35). Merleau-Ponty calls this "thickness" between the world and ourselves "flesh" (135); it is a "coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body" (146). When we reflect on our experience, we bring conceptuality to this thickness, but we fail to take hold of the immediacy of exposure as such, which will always, for reflection, be a "ruin," something that happened prior to its account, attesting to a no-longer-present meaning.<sup>8</sup> In this way, all account-giving is a kind of loss in its very hold on what is happening, a loss we must constantly bear in mind when we engage with theoretical attempts to grasp our experience. This is especially so with respect to the notions of "self," "body," and "other" that are so central to our interpretations of sexuality.

Flesh as the "thickness" between body and world renders ambiguous the relation between materiality and meaning, self and other, self and world.<sup>9</sup> The *what* of our experience attracts us, shaping our seeing and touching, working on our perceptual bodies. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "the things attract my look, my gaze caresses the things, it espouses their contours and reliefs, between it and them we catch sight of a complicity" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 76). What we reductively call the "object of" our experience might thus better be referred to as our collaborator in experience. Consider simply how the clothing that appears attractive to us one year can seem unattractive the next: this typically reflects not one's own reflective revision of preferences but one's experience of what others are wearing: the way others appear shapes the way I see, and from this emerges what I prefer. The origin and operation of desire is ambiguous: it is something the world puts into me and something I contribute to the world. Even more basically than this learned experience of cultural preference, this mutual dependence of perceiver and perceived is evident in the very make-up of our organism. Eva M. Simms, studying infant perception, observes that the infant's mouth opens when its side is touched and spontaneously takes the shape of the nipple, and the newborn's eye "can see the perfect distance of twelve inches" requisite for seeing the mother's face. "*The newborn's action finds its complement and completion in the actions*

of the (m)other”; in short, “a world of things and others . . . is already prefigured in one’s own body” (Simms 2008, 14–15). There is an inherent complicity of body and world, and this complicity operates in advance of reflection<sup>10</sup>: body and world “know” each other in ways reflection cannot penetrate. The “perceptual bond” we have with the world, as Merleau-Ponty observes, is a “secret” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 38). When we launch ourselves into reflection, we draw already from this intertwining, this coupling of two that are never simply two because they are never apart.

Rosalyn Diprose makes a comparable point with respect to the interpersonal domain: “I am for-myself by being first of all with and for other lived bodies” (Diprose 2002, 89). Human existence, she argues, is intercorporeal; our bodies are built from an original intertwining with the bodies of others, from an early “syncretic sociability” in which we do not clearly distinguish our own bodies from our bodies as perceived by others or from their bodies perceived by us.<sup>11</sup> We have already been dispossessed by the bodies of others such that our own bodily existence develops on the basis of other bodies, their gestures, expressions, touch, sound, appearance.

This intertwining also implies that we are not simply ourselves sexually.<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty remarks that the body “becomes ambiguous in the experience we have of it, pre-eminently in sexual experience” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 171), and, in bringing this notion of flesh (and Diprose’s notion of corporeal generosity) to the analysis of sexual experience, we can tease out three separately discernible forms or expressions of ambiguity. First, the body–world relation is a matter of prereflective, bodily *intelligence*; it is an “intertwining” in which the material and the intelligible are inseparable. We belong to the visible and the tactile and have emerged to sense through this belonging, through impressing and being impressed upon. Second, we are not “masses” but “hollows” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 151); we are beings who are essentially open, receptive, and dynamic, taking shape around the touch and impact of others. The meanings borne by the touch of another can be grafted upon us like a new shoot that reaches out to the world differently. We are beings who are never unpaired from world and others, who undergo meaningful passage between meaningful pairings, who never close up the hollow and congeal into a fixed form. Flesh manifests identities characterized by divergence (*écart*) (135–36)—beings not circulating around each other but always already “inside of” each other and “outside of” themselves, never fully consolidated but always in the process of consolidating, potentially through pairings with others. Third, we are not whole, bordered bodies bearing discrete parts and self-defined sexual identities; rather, our parts and bodies are part of and defined by a whole that is beyond them and dynamic, as the potentiality of these expressive bodies. Because we grow around the meanings of others, the parts and pairings circulating in this “sexual field” shape our own. Interpreting sexuality in light of these three ambiguities—the ambiguity between materiality and intelligibility in the body–world relation, or *the body as meaningful*; the ambiguity between self and others in the body–others relation, or *the body as hollow*; the ambiguity between self and others in the body–world relation, or *the whole as sexual field*—offers a critical perspective on many of the familiar ways we typically reflect on sexuality.

### A Phenomenology of Sexual Experience

Sexual experience is a clear manifestation of the reality of what Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* calls the “back-and-forth of existence” between the physiological and the psychical in which the one is never left out of the business of the other,

the “union of the soul and the body” that is “accomplished at each moment in the movement of existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 90–91). Sexual life “designates a sector of our life that maintains peculiar relations with the existence of the sexual organ” (162), in the sense that there is “no single psychical act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions” (90). Neither, however, is there any “single movement in the living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychical intentions” (90). The prereflective pairing of body and world does not discriminate between psychical and physiological realities.

Let us consider desire, which is perhaps the most immediate expression of one’s sexuality in relation to others. Desire is neither simply triggered by emotional (psychic) orientations, nor by one’s (material) sex organs or those of the other. As Merleau-Ponty writes, in sexual desire “we do not attempt . . . to possess a body,” but “rather a body animated by a consciousness” (170). The psychical and material elements are, rather, the psychical and material potentialities that are appropriated and actualized as such by the sexual experience. We are charged by the attention of others, not simply by our own physiological mechanisms or by others’ bodies as attractive and capable of manipulating our own. Sexual desire is a response to the *body* as the site of an *attitude*.<sup>13</sup>

Further, it is also not the case that sexuality involves merely using one’s body as a kind of tool by which to express self-conscious reflection. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty observes, “there is an erotic comprehension that is not of the order of the understanding . . . desire comprehends blindly by linking one body to another” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 159). To be sexually attracted to someone is not to discern this intellectually and then command a bodily response. Rather, it is to find oneself *already* responding to them in one’s body. It is similarly meaningful to us that others experience their bodies as yearning for us, rather than merely agreeing to engage sexually with us. To be a sexual being is to operate according to a sense that emerges from the body in response to another person.<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that tactile stimuli and the internal powers of the organic body always *mean* something, and this entanglement of the bodily with the meaningful is fundamental to the sexual situation (158).

Merleau-Ponty compares the body to a work of art (152), which is a helpful analogy for understanding the meaningfulness that is alive in sexuality. An artwork is meaningful, but this meaningfulness is rooted in materiality—in pigment, canvas, rhythm, tone, pitch, stone, figure—not invented or communicated conceptually. Meaning is not simply of the order of the conceptual and reducible to it, and yet it is neither simply of the order of the natural or reducible to it; it is *as* pigment and tone that meaning occurs. Similarly, in the sexual situation, materiality and existence never come separately; physical parts are not simply natural objects but expressive, and participation in sexual interaction cannot be mechanically produced; and yet sexual interaction is neither a matter of abstract, reflective conceptuality, the outcome of decisions from some cognitive “base of operations.” It is decidedly and uniquely bodily and meaningful, its meaningfulness attached to and emergent from the bodily equivalents of pigment and tone—the arc of the back, the sound of the voice, and so on. It does not suit the body’s intelligibility and communicative power to procure its engagement through either mechanical manipulation or intellectual argument.<sup>15</sup> The sexual situation is a bodily, articulate dimension of meaning rooted in color, texture, movement, and contact. Materiality is always muddled with meaning in the body.

This complicity between body and world, further, is not itself a solid, simple “substance,” and neither are the two accomplices construable on their own as substances. Merleau-Ponty speaks of flesh in terms of “divergence” or *écart*, not in terms of a

“one” or a “substance” that precedes differentiation, but “that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its [the body’s] natal secret” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135–36). We might recall Luce Irigaray’s description of the “sex which is not one” for a comparable model of a duality irreducible to a simple unity: “within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” (Irigaray 1985, 24). In the perceptual bond, neither body nor world is an originally separable unit; their original condition is to be a rapport, an intertwining such that each would be “at sea” without the other.

This point is particularly exemplified in the phenomenon of touch. Let us say that one person touches the other. In that moment, the one who touches is also touched. Something happens *to* each in this touching: each is a registering of the other through *being affected*, their experience taking the shape it does because of that influence, such that *being affected* is the real thing, with a history that extends well before the emergence of an “I.” In a perceptive essay on flesh and touch in Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler describes this well: “when one touches a living and sentient being, one never touches a mass, for the moment of touch is the one in which something comes apart, mass splits, and the notion of substance does not—cannot—hold . . . we are not speaking of masses but of passages, divisions, and proximities” (Butler 2015, 54). We could say of touch what Maria Talero notes of gestures, that they “point beyond themselves to an identity that is never consolidated on the other side of that pointing” (Talero 2017, 41): touch does not touch a consolidated identity on the other side of touch. Through touch and being touched—through the gap or divergence between touching and touched, self and being, self and other—we *are becoming*, in a way that does not congeal into something fixed. Talero calls this the “unclosable spread between lived body and world” (48).

To capture this reality that is not a substance but an unclosable spread, an openness to becoming someone in and through the experience of being affected, Merleau-Ponty invokes the notion of “hollow.” Our status as hollow is experienced in an exemplary way in interaction with others. Others operate within us in the unfolding of experience: in conversation, in reading, in being with someone, we find their words, feelings, and perspective taking root in us and redirecting us. Sexual interaction and desire are a particularly powerful manifestation of the body as hollow.<sup>16</sup> When we desire someone, for instance, it is as though the outside world in the form of another person pierces the body, declaring its significance to the body in the body’s own experience by redirecting it. Desire—one’s own experience—is not instigated by oneself. One finds one’s body splitting and becoming room for the way others are, receptive to their grafting of shoots upon oneself. Describing the interplay of desiring bodies, Gayle Salamon writes that “my arm is experienced less as my arm and more as toward you” (Salamon 2010, 54), that the sexual schema “delivers my own body to me through the movement of my body toward another” (56). “I” and “my parts” are animated by what “you” are and do. Desire is a manifestation of our dispossession by the world and by others: we are not in charge of our own experience.

To engage in sexual interaction with someone is to experience one’s intentions joining with and taking shape around another’s, such that, for instance, one’s arm follows the trajectory set by the other’s desire, and the other’s lips follow the trajectory of one’s desire—where intentions are mixed in an unfolding process that has captivated those involved. Sexual interaction is a process in which bodies discern possibilities for the integration of intentions—even intentions they do not know they have, that are discovered through the agency of another body in their own as hollow. To engage in

sexual interaction is to be inhabited by another, who moves one's thoughts, desires, and actions from the inside in unpredictable ways, over time.<sup>17</sup>

Sexual experience for beings who are "hollow," then, would not be experience in which one person was "in charge of" the sexual situation. To experience agency in this context is to experience the other enacting my agency with me: actions are not purely the result of one's own intentions but are produced by the bodies of others, by the process that has captivated us, and by the inherently communicative significance of the situation.<sup>18</sup> In other words, in my thoughts, desires, words, body, and actions the other's thoughts, desires, words, body, and actions find expression. As hollow, we are moved and we develop; we do not stand behind and "operate" this process. We are this receptivity to an other; what is happening in this gap or *écart* shapes us. And when this goes well, we feel our desire for others and the desire of others for us inside of us as a new power that we have, a transformation that causes us to inhabit and reach out to the world differently—even to see a new world in this reaching out.

There is a further way in which the notion of flesh contains an ambiguity that is key to the unfolding of sexual experience, which is captured in the idea of a "field." Because of flesh—the intertwining of body and world, perceptual openness, and the body as hollow—the meanings circulating in the world around us can become our meanings. What this means with regard to sexuality is that others' modes of sexual existence change our orientation to sexuality, independently of our choice or consent. Possibilities of being sexual differently are opened for us all the time by virtue of our status as hollow, as flesh, as being-in-the-world. This idea is captured by what Merleau-Ponty calls "field," a term that Lisa Guenther, analyzing sexual difference, uses to designate that context in which "sexed bodies make sense as nodes of possibility" rather than as fixed (Guenther 2011, 29). Possibilities for how we orient ourselves in the world sexually, in addition to possibilities of sexual difference, proliferate in interaction with the meanings circulating around us, by which we are cross-fertilized (Guenther 2010, 33–34). They operate in the way that Gail Weiss observes about desire and pleasure: they are intercorporeal and spread across bodies "contagiously" (Weiss 2018, 192).<sup>19</sup> In other words, it is not our own bodies that are a whole in terms of which our body's parts and capacities have meaning; the whole is rather the world we experience, as sexual field. Possibilities lived by others become my possibilities, and vice versa: we are intimately affected by the way others live sexually and thus not indifferent to the question of how they do so. Guenther observes that "I encounter the possibility of being sexed otherwise"—and, for our purposes, being sexual otherwise—"every day in my exchanges with parents, friends, sexual partners, colleagues, and even strangers who are sexed differently from me, and I also encounter it in those who have different ways of being 'same' sex" (Guenther 2011, 29). Claims to sexual self-definition are thus destabilized by the primordial character of our openness to others. Individual sexuality is, for better or worse, defined not only by ourselves or by our intimate partners but by others beyond our interaction: sexuality is an essentially collective phenomenon, a matter of possibilities strewn across the sexual field. The intimate domain, we might say, is inevitably public.

This analysis is relevant to consideration of the sex organs as well, the parts of the body thought to be most sexually relevant. Guenther observes that possibilities for sexual transformation are provided both biologically and socially: in the empirical occurrence of bodies sexed in ways that are not simply expressions of the male–female duality, and in political movements, such as those of intersex and trans communities, that put pressure on that duality (29). We have already seen that sexuality does not

extend merely from the physiological, since flesh has always already muddled the distinction between the physiological and the meaningful, and since the meaningful circulates around us; thus, whereas the species depends so far on the intermittent integration of egg and sperm, our sexuality is not governed by such an imperative. But further, as Guenther suggests, these parts also always stand in relation to specific social, sexual, and cultural fields and meanings. Sex organs are potentialities actualized by these fields; “my organism” and “the general form of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 86) each exist as the other’s potentiality (Talero 2017).

Sexuality and sexual meanings circulating in the world have the capacity to become *our* meanings, insofar as they can transport *themselves* inside of us, as it were, moving us inwardly, whether or not we “allow” them to or consciously adopt them. Given our status as radically receptive, new enactments of sexual identity and expression are not limited only to those whose visions they are. Desires are dynamic, affected and transformed by the desires of others (Weiss 2018): the site of the formation of sexual identity and desire extends well beyond our own sexed bodies. The sexual meanings I live are contextualized by the meanings that others live, and they together constitute my sense of the meaning of sexuality and my sense of what is possible.

The many ambiguities captured in the notion of flesh—between materiality and intelligibility, self and other, self and field—thus belong integrally to sexual experience. Sexual experience is an experience of receptivity to externality in terms of which our sexed bodies and their parts are potentialities actualized in intertwining, and thus it rests on our ability to retain a kind of openness to being. “Sexual self-making” (Alcoff 2018) requires that we be able to remain open to the world.

Beyond elaborating the character of sexual experience, this account should shape our approach to problems that arise in the sexual domain—particularly the problem of sexual violation and that of the distortions inherited from sexism and heterosexism. The central question here is: do inherited assumptions around sexual experience suppress or deny its ambiguities, and do our responses to these problems in turn adequately recognize these ambiguities? My first argument, in the following section, will be that distortions related to sexist and heterosexist oppression have produced two standard stances toward sexual experience: the stance of control over sexuality as flesh, and the stance of withdrawal from sexuality as flesh, neither of which accommodates the ambiguities of the sexual situation. My second argument, which I will develop in the final section of the article, will be that our responses to the problem of sexual violation also often conceal and suppress the meaningful ambiguities that attach to the sexual situation. The guiding challenges here are: How can we shape the world in such a way that we can be sustained there as hollow? Can we live our sexual touching in touch with the tactility that precedes it; can we live, as Beauvoir might ask, as reversibly skin and hand (Beauvoir 2011, 389); can we sustain our experience of animation “by others into whose hands we are born” (Butler 2015, 62)? Can we work against the experiences of closure and defensive withdrawal that experiences of vulnerability can occasion? And can our philosophical reflection on sexual experience honor its rootedness in flesh and in the prereflective perceptual faith?

### Oppression and Suppression in Sexual Experience

Sexual experience is emblematic of the intertwining that is fundamental to experience as such. We have a long history, however, of taking up sexuality on the basis of assumptions that deny and suppress this intertwining. Addressing this denial and suppression,

Butler concludes her reading of Merleau-Ponty with the observation that “one might consider oneself only touched, or only touching, and pursue positions of mastery or self-loss that try to do away with this intertwining” (Butler 2015, 62). We can indeed respond to the ambiguity intrinsic to our experience as flesh by cultivating an attitude of mastery or self-loss, which are stances we take toward our character as flesh: we can seek either to control our original exposure to the world, or to withdraw from and evade it. In fact, the stances of control and withdrawal arise precisely because of intertwining: if experience unfolds through the operation of others and the world in us, it will reflect the habits entrenched in our social situations, and our sexual experience can thus become a powerful site for the transmission and perpetuation of social biases. Diprose describes this phenomenon with the notion of “tolerance” (Diprose 2002, 55), following Merleau-Ponty, who writes that “freedom is always an encounter between the exterior and the interior . . . and it weakens, without ever becoming zero, to the extent that the tolerance of the bodily and institutional givens of our life diminishes” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 481). Intercorporeal existence has already cultivated in us a certain level of tolerance with regard to different ways of living out intercorporeality, and what we can and cannot tolerate can be shaped by oppressive social habits and thus be a restriction on freedom, if it restricts our capacity to inhabit a stance of exposure and openness.

These stances—specific candidates for what we have learned to tolerate and not tolerate—have been typically articulated along gender lines. The agency of women (and perhaps also of those who are gender-nonconforming, though the case here would require independent analysis) 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; the terms of sexual interaction have been set by the desire of the man more so than by the woman’s; desire from men has been understood as to be feared, which can suppress women’s experience of their own desire and of the integration of desires; what has been desired from women is self-subordination; their bodies have been construed as the key element women bring to sexual interaction, and so on. These characteristics are not at play in every episode of sexual interaction—and sexual interaction does not exactly unfold on such binary lines—but they are nevertheless common and surely familiar to us. They seep into queer relations in various ways as well, although these relations can also be the site of reflection on, resistance to, and ambiguation of such patterns.

These common occurrences are due partly to a prevalent cultural stereotype concerning sexual interaction, to which we are vulnerable even if we oppose it. It is that women are required to take up their sensuality, to use Beauvoir’s terms, in the form of “skin” and not “hand”: woman’s “sensuality is located both in her skin and her hand: and their exigencies are in opposition to each other” (Beauvoir 2011, 389).<sup>20</sup> Women are pressed to make themselves into alluring objects, and if they encounter sexual aggression, they can be blamed for having made themselves alluring. They are pressed and molded in such a way that the content of their desire becomes to inspire desire in others by being attractive objects; the content of their sexual activity becomes to produce another’s pleasure; their preoccupation becomes how they appear to that other. This is akin to what Cahill captures with the notion of “derivatization” (Cahill 2011): one person is derivative of another, reduced to a reflection of their needs and desires. Other elements of sexist oppression—economic and psychological precariousness and the active threat of sexual violation, for instance—fuel this stereotype, bringing

nonsexual preoccupations to the sexual scene: the question of whether one can receive security and affirmation from “giving” sex, the felt need for caution and self-protection, and so on. As it concerns men, the stereotype is that they are “hand,” active agents of sexual desire who touch, who command the sexual situation, oriented toward their own pleasure and concerned with attractive, passive objects and not with perspectives. Their orientation can become explicitly aggressive, which is an extension of their being pressed and molded to actively assume control of the terms of interaction.<sup>21</sup>

We can diagnose two opposed but related problems here: women have been cultivated to be defensive against sexuality and the world; men have been cultivated to inhabit sexual interaction and their sexual personae as though they were something that men defined and controlled.<sup>22</sup> To resist sexist oppression, then, is to oppose two problems: the assumption of self-defined, controlling sexuality associated specifically with the masculine, and the defensive stance against sexuality associated with the feminine. Those rendered vulnerable by the threat and occurrence of sexual violation, as Alcoff observes, are exhorted to caution, self-defense, and resilience, “as if self-regard can only be manifest . . . in forms of self-protection” (Alcoff 2018, 143). The opposed exhortation to those whose sexual power is affirmed is to focus on self-assertion and the practice of willfulness. Both stances run contrary to the character of sexuality and are two sides of the same coin: neither participates in sexual flesh, but one defends herself against it and the other denies it.<sup>23</sup>

In interaction where one is hand and the other skin, where one manages and the other withdraws, we see most clearly a failure to inhabit the body as hollow, as the site that finds itself becoming room for the grafting of another’s meaning, where neither withdraws or controls. Sexual experience involves the basic experience of openness to the intimate exposure of flesh, touching-touched, ambiguous passivity-activity. It is a source of great meaningfulness to us to be “metaphysically inseparable” in this way, a pairing, sexually in and of flesh.

In the sexual situation, as in others, the model of the independent, autonomous individual is inadequate; to be free in it is not simply to be self-defining. In fact, the historically sexist character of sexual interaction may be rooted in assumptions that free subjectivity is a matter of individual self-definition.<sup>24</sup> As hollow, however, we are propelled by another hollow to expand beyond the conditions of the initial situation. To think that the meaning of my action will be unchanged by another’s response, that their agency could not transform mine, that there can be certainty about how gestures will be received, that the joining of our freedom will not produce new significance, that standards from outside our interaction are appropriate to it: these strategies can preclude meaningful sexual interaction.<sup>25</sup> As Diprose argues, freedom is our very capacity to remain open to the bodies of others, and to have their possibilities, their capacities for transcendence, resonate within our experience. The freedom of bodies built through intertwining is expanded to the extent that we can remain open to the possibilities presented by others. Thus “sex is not safe,” because “it opens the self to indeterminate possibilities through exploiting the ambiguity of being a body-for-itself-for-others” (Diprose 2002, 88). Body is an ambiguous hinge between “for itself” and “for others.”<sup>26</sup> And yet the sexual situation carries our freedom elsewhere only by engaging *it*: the “elsewhere” experienced by this free being is not an elsewhere to which it is dragged, but an elsewhere that emerges for it, as its own-most possibility, through its capacity to be affected.

The stances of withdrawal and control also fail to answer to the ambiguity of flesh as indiscernibly material-meaningful. In each stance, we see a separation of body and

will—will in charge of bodies, or will acquiescing and “giving over” the body as object. But this is ultimately a *caricature of willing* that does not respect the body as its own force, embedded in the flesh of the world, discerning and intelligent, even prior to active reflection. To assume control of bodies or to withdraw one’s will from the body in acquiescence to sexual interaction is to fail to embrace the body’s intelligent rapport with the world that is so central to sexuality. In sexual experience we witness the ambiguity of self and body, meaningful and material; we find a “holding dear” that expresses itself in pleasure, and a pleasure that moves this “holding dear.” We can distinguish the two elements—embodiment and perspective, materiality and meaning, object and will—only analytically, as they do not come separately.

Since the body is where we are, where what we want and what we will are being defined, the action we take in sexual situations is risky and existentially uncertain, for it is I who am unfolding there, as body, with the other as body. To precisely establish prior to the unfolding the aim intended in that unfolding is to suppress this body, whereas, on the contrary, to say “yes” in such situations is only, as Butler remarks, “a bid, a probe, an essay, a way of lending oneself out for an experience about which one cannot say in advance if it will be good or bad” (Butler 2012, 24). This is partly because we live on the basis of a bodily intelligence that we do not master; reflection does not “go all the way down.” The body responds; it initiates; it registers meaning; it reflects layers of psychologically and emotionally charged behavioral habituation. Thus, to “make a move” in a sexual situation is as though to ask a question while uncertain of the response, even from oneself, and it is to make uncertain claims to the other without the assurance that they will be registered and affirmed; the other cannot guarantee it. Developing our bodily capacity for sense and communication, and discerning the sense of our interaction through bodily communication, are of independent value to us. If we are to be honest to our sexuality, we must allow bodies to be the nonobjects they are, not construing them as instruments to be managed by will and reflection.

The stances of defensive withdrawal and control also relate poorly to the reality of the sexual field. Although it is structured and permeated by traditional sexual meanings, it is also that domain in which other visions of sexual interaction circulate, visions that suggest that the horizon of the sexual field is open. These are often, though not always, linked to nontraditional visions of gender and sexual experience, each of which potentially supports the struggle against sexist and heterosexist oppression by putting pressure on the binary association of women with defensive withdrawal and men with control. We can withdraw from the world and its multiple sexual meanings, or we can try to control it or assume a false control over our own sexuality in relation to it. We can inhabit a rigid sexual type related to withdrawal and control, falsely imagining ourselves to be closed to the circulation of meanings in the sexual field. We are, however, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, “entries to the same being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 82), “moments of the same syntax . . . [that] count in the same world” (83), or, as Guenther observes, “nodes of possibility” in relation to that being, world, or field (Guenther 2011, 29). The sexual encounter happens in that being, in that world, in terms of that syntax, not simply *to* one or *in* the other. To retain one’s sensitivity to the “atmospheric” quality of sexuality (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 171) by being able to be in the world without defensiveness or aggression is of the utmost significance. We find out in the unfolding between world and self what the “strictly individual” character of the “sexual schema” will be (158), open to being unmoored from the binary fates associated with withdrawal and control.

Beyond the criticism of sexual stereotypes, we can also invoke this model to challenge strategies for their transformation and strategies for opposition to sexual violation. The question for such strategies is the same: namely, do they effectively engage with the “styles” already operative in our intercorporeality, with the degree of “bodily tolerance” (Diprose 2002, 92) that we have developed, given “where” and “when” we are? Do they contribute to destabilizing the stances of withdrawal and control, or do they shore them up, encouraging tendencies toward them? While we regularly see suppression of ambiguity in sexual experience linked to sexist oppression, we can also see suppression of ambiguity in feminist resistance to sexist oppression. Fear of transgression can encourage the adoption of a model of sexual interaction that carries with it its own possibilities for harm.<sup>27</sup> The issue of sexual violation as such requires its own independent treatment, but in the final section I will address the separable issue of how we interact with the legal-judicial domain in response to oppression and violation, in relation to which I will treat in particular the standard of consent, which, even though it is challenged just as much as it is defended in philosophical and legal theory, dominates courtrooms, popular discourse, and often the decisions of government officials and university administrators.<sup>28</sup>

#### “Juridicism” and the Case of Consent

To address sexual violation effectively requires that we have firmly in mind a sense of how we have been intercorporeally shaped as sexual beings and “what is to be sustained and protected.” Otherwise, we risk that our strategies will contribute to the problems they are supposed to fix, exacerbating the stances of withdrawal and control that lie at the heart of sexist and heterosexist oppression. For good reason, opposition to sexual violation often makes recourse to the legal-judicial domain. Our analysis of flesh, however, in describing our original bonds with the world and others that affect the character of sexual interaction, draws attention to ways in which the character of sexual experience is intrinsically at variance with the normative structure of the legal-judicial domain. Daniel Loick calls the creep of law into other domains “juridicism . . . [which] tends to convert all human interaction into legal or quasi-legal matters and thus fails to acknowledge the specific normative structure of intimate interactions” (Loick 2020, 412); it is this issue with respect to sexuality that guides this final section. Diprose highlights the way in which intercorporeality is prior to deliberation and choice, and thereby “precedes and exceeds” the operation of power in the legal domain (Diprose 2002, 45). Sexuality operates in the terms inherited from our intercorporeality, similarly “preceding and exceeding” legal relationships, and it requires that the legal-judicial domain, so to speak, “stay in its own lane.”<sup>29</sup> We will always have to live in some proximity to the legal domain—and for good reason (see Hoff 2014a; 2014b, especially chapter 4)—but it is not innocent from the point of view of the problematic stances of withdrawal and control that I have described here. When its defining authority spills over into domains in which its form of discourse is impoverishing rather than productive, this can exacerbate the conditions it is invoked to fix. We could take this as a reason for Butler’s remark that we should not become “drenched in its discourse” (Butler 2012, 25). I will argue therefore that caution with respect to these distinctions is required in our inhabitation of “ordinary” sexual experience, as well as in the face of litigation related to sexual activity, reliance on the norms of the legal-judicial domain for addressing problems arising in the sexual domain, and invocation of the norm of consent.<sup>30</sup>

It is also the case, however, that the now well-developed and valuable criticisms of the discourse of consent do not typically offer a more systematic account of the character of experience in general and sexual experience in particular, seeming largely uninterested in the deeper ontological question of who we are in relation to others and the world. Thus John Gardner, for instance, attests that good sex is a joint activity, something done together, but does not describe how this “together” or “jointness” operates (Gardner 2018). Lois Pineau, Tanya Palmer, Michelle J. Anderson, and Rebecca Kukla each pursue the question of communication and negotiation in sexual interaction and, though noting worthwhile things about it, do not explicitly consider the ambiguous character of the beings involved, whose selfhood and communication are always already a “pastiche” of others’, and do not problematize how the idea of negotiation relies on the legally recognized, autonomous subject (Pineau 1989; Anderson 2005; Palmer 2017; Kukla 2018). They come to the scene, as it were, after the scene has already been constituted, and do not thematize that prior constitution.<sup>31</sup>

As body–world relations, as “hollow,” and as dwelling in a sexual field, we are the kind of being whose intimate experience is elaborated in and by the world, and whose intelligent body is built out of intertwining. This character is not well reflected in the “contractual scene” of the legal-judicial domain, which operates in terms that are derivative of and produced by the prior fashioning we undergo, and not well reflected in the autonomous individuals who inhabit it, who emerge from the primordial scene of intertwining. This character is not reflected, as Alcoff describes it, in the “tightly constrained discursive space available in a courtroom,” where the focus on precedence and outcomes requires catering to existing presumptions rather than elaborating new visions (Alcoff 2018, 14). It is the aim of the courts, she says, to “establish individual culpability,” but this does not answer to the idea of sexuality as field, which is better addressed by “activists, scholars, and victims and their supporters [who] are more often interested in social change, analysis, and understanding” (14)—precisely because of the weight of what Merleau-Ponty calls “sedimentation” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 466) and what Diprose calls a “pattern of existence that leans toward certain practices and that cannot tolerate others” (Diprose 2002, 55). Indeed, the law’s focus is not the dismantling of the stances of withdrawal and control, but rather their reinforcement. In this way, these very legal arenas, including policing, court practices, and carceral injustice (Alcoff 2018, 14), are a significant part of the problem, not its solution.

The language of consent is one of the ways in which our approach to what counts as good sexual practice is taken not from a rich account of the character of sexual experience as such, and a rich awareness of the prior problems that make of sex a matter of men asking and women acquiescing, but from the terms of the legal domain. Alcoff asks, “what does the contemporary reliance on the concept of consent reveal about our understandings of sex and of sexual violation” (125)? Being sexually in and of flesh offers a rich philosophical grounding for these kinds of concerns regarding the concept of consent: that is, the specific account of the nature of sexual experience proposed here should help us see *how* it is vulnerable to being profoundly mishandled by the normative structures of the legal domain. If sexuality is a matter of the intertwining of bodies and worlds, of perception and things, of sexuality and field, this means that it is at odds with a discourse that operates in terms of “caricatures of willing”—that is, a model of contractual reasoning enacted by separate individuals whose obligations, as Nancy J. Hirschmann observes, are thought to be assumed voluntarily (Hirschmann 1992, 21).<sup>32</sup> If we are produced through intertwining, and if distinction from others is never absolute, then legal discourse in the domain of human interaction may operate

on the basis of a denial of what is happening and a reduction of what is possible, rather than a protection thereof. Sexual experience is that of a being who is a hollow in which meanings can be and have already been grafted, and these meanings can come from what we see and touch, from things, from the world, from strangers, from words. Sexual meanings circulate and are dispersed beyond human beings and pairs, in the world and in things.<sup>33</sup> Most important, legal discourse operates with the assumption that we are independent individuals whose freedom is experienced in terms of choice and self-determination, which means it does not effectively grapple with the fact that we are always shaped interpersonally and intercorporeally, prior to our wishes; in fact, our very wishes have been formed by a world to which consent was not possible. Let us now consider the issue of consent explicitly in relation to the three ambiguities identified in this article.

First, if we think of sexual interaction in terms of the interaction of bodies operating with an intelligence that is neither simply reflective nor simply conceptual, this is at odds with the norm of consent, insofar as it implies a consciousness in charge of a body, where participants' thoughts and perspectives are formed prior to and independently of bodily engagement. But it is the body that knows, desires, learns, and grasps the other; my body may be "smarter" than "I" am, may be more in touch with what "I want"; my "consciousness" might be out of touch. This point resonates with Butler's critique of consent, which challenges the idea of a "choosing and perspicacious 'I'" because of the belief that we are not in charge of our own "psychic processes" (Butler 2012, 23). The norm of consent, implying that consciousness is the site of decision, undermines the project of developing bodily attunement, the bodily powers of sensitivity and insight into another embodied perspective, the body as a site of authority in discernment that consciousness does not have, as well as human openness to redirection in the actual encounter. It is true that at any time in the encounter consent can be revoked, but the very situation projected by the norm of consent is one in which how the encounter unfolds means little. The model of body as intelligent, body as hollow, and sexuality as field projects a situation in which we do not know what will unfold in our sexuality and in the sexual encounter, and we open ourselves to that. Whatever protection against sexual violation the ideal of consent may offer, it is not straightforwardly the case that we should embrace a model of sexual interaction that relies on a caricature of willing, that misrepresents the body's own functioning and its capacity for sense, and that suppresses the meaningful, nonverbal, and dynamic dimensions of sexual experience, alienating body and consciousness.<sup>34</sup>

Second and related, if we think in terms of body as hollow and as embedded in the sexual field, we see that the notion of consent implies a reductive model of the character of those who consent, construing them as crafting their own sexual experience. Sexuality is an area of human experience where we find that what is sexually meaningful to us rests on our cultivation in a determinate world that has already shaped our desires, and is open to what may emerge for us through others and in the sexual field. The paradigm of consent here can cultivate in us a stance of denial with regard to the exposure that is central to sexual experience—that which has already happened and that which could still happen. It can strip sexuality of its power and possibility for transformation, encourage repression, and inhibit exploration. As sexually in and of flesh, we *participate* in what Alcoff calls our sexual self-making (Alcoff 2018); insofar as we are body as hollow, exposed to a sexual field, the role of externality in that sexual self-making cannot be denied, even while we address the negative consequences that this exposure has entailed and can entail. Sexuality may have, as Butler notes, "a way of breaking contracts,

rendering them tenuous, or exceeding their terms,” and we may “make a mistake by confusing the juridical model of consent with the kind of ‘yes’-saying and ‘no’-saying that happens in the midst of sexual encounters and dilemmas” (Butler 2012, 22). We are always within experience, and are inevitably dependent upon *the exposures it offers* to develop new ways of being in it.<sup>35</sup>

Third, there are clearly also problems with regard to the way the ideal of consent *interacts* with deeply entrenched structural or social conditions and conceals them by focusing on individuals and their choices. The interpretive frameworks provided by the notion of a sexual field and the stances of withdrawal and control can aid in navigating this terrain. Although this problem has been rehearsed at length in the scholarly literature, the terms of this analysis nevertheless underline it in a unique way: namely, consent operates to entrench us in our stances of withdrawal and control and in the world’s differential punishing and rewarding of those who inhabit these stances, and denies the relevance of the field beyond our interaction. There are at least three discernible aspects to this problem. First, as Alcoff notes, as a contractual exchange between individuals, consent can conceal the ways in which our choices are constrained by existing structures (Alcoff 2018, 153) and the many background conditions that may motivate it, beyond the desire to engage in sex (128). Those with low social status because of structural social inequities may consent for reasons that are nonsexual: for instance, to avoid conflict that would lead to emotional, economic, or social precariousness or physical violence.<sup>36</sup> There is a second issue here in consent’s capacity to conceal constraints on choice. Emphasis on consent can be used to oppose redress of unjust and inequitable relations among consenting parties, and to divert resources for such redress. Third, the operationalization of consent differently construes the contracting parties, since it is popularly implied that men ask and women consent; consent thus appears, as Michelle Anderson notes, as “a woman’s passive acquiescence to male sexual initiative” (Anderson 2005, 1406). To be masculine is to shape the sexual scenario; to be feminine is to grudgingly acquiesce. As Alcoff argues, when we focus on whether a woman has consented, we do not work toward challenging the “conventions in which men ask and women answer” (Alcoff 2018, 128), but buttress the sense that this scenario is ordinary. By “insisting on the question of whether or not the woman consented,” Cahill argues, “the legal framing of sexual violence” reiterates the terms of the assault, in which women are construed as derivative participants in the unfolding of the man’s desire (Cahill 2011, 140). The image of men asking and women answering also represses nonheterosexual meanings that circulate in the sexual field. In sum, the consent paradigm can hold up the deeply inequitable structures and systems in which acts of consent *are always embedded*. Here we can take guidance from the general idea behind sexuality as field: we must look beyond the object of our inquiry to understand how it operates.

The model of consent seeks to guide us away from oppressive sex, but the heart of oppressive sex is the return it perpetually makes to the past, to the learned stances of defensive withdrawal and control, and the standard of consent can operate in such a way as to sustain that heart rather than dismantle it. The pieces of our experience that render it meaningful have often invaded it independently of our consent; they do not extend directly from our will but depend on our openness and receptivity, and if we were in charge of them they would be radically impoverished. Legal protections of independence can falsely posit a metaphysical separability, whereas we accomplish and discover ourselves only with others in the world, with uncertainty propelling our development, interaction expanding our freedom, and changing ways of being

sexual infiltrating and directing our own. If the law is complicit in cultivating a world in which the stances available to us are those of withdrawal and control in relation to our status as flesh, then, rather than solving the problems of sexual oppression, suppression, and violation, it may exacerbate them, and proximity to it must be carefully navigated.

### Phenomenology and Sexual Experience

The phenomenological commitment to describing accurately what it is to participate in experience suggests to us from the outset that we are much more than the product of our own willing and intentions. We are made in and by the world, in and by the passage between ourselves and the world, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and things. Although sexuality is an important theme in the work of the great phenomenological writers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir (Sartre 1973; Beauvoir 2011; Merleau-Ponty 2013), it remains a relatively underdeveloped domain of phenomenological investigation, especially with regard to its relevance to the understanding of heterosexist and sexist oppression and sexual violation. In this essay, therefore, I have invoked Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to contribute to the project of rooting feminist discussions of sexual experience in a theoretical, phenomenological underpinning; challenging stereotypical modes of inhabiting sexual experience; challenging the popular and institutional presumptions of the value of the norm of consent; and offering a phenomenological analysis of the norm of consent that can underpin and supplement extant, nonphenomenological criticisms of the discourse of consent. The core of my argument is the articulating of specific forms of ambiguity that lie implicit in the notion of flesh and are relevant to the domain of sexual experience, and the corresponding identification of problematic sexual attitudes that suppress or deny these ambiguities. My conclusion, in short, is that we must tread carefully in relation to the strategies that purport to address the problems of experience while in fact dishonestly reducing the ambiguities within it: ambiguity should be allowed to take root in our interaction, not sacrificed in the name of an impoverished sense of freedom and self-protection. In our approaches to sexual interaction and to sexual violation, we must aim to sustain the belongingness to being that pertains to sexual flesh, and to truck with the ambiguity that sexuality brings with it.

### Notes

1 It is true, of course, that any particular attempt at phenomenological description can be marked by the psychic and social inheritance of sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism, of destructive patterns mapped out for us materially and interpersonally by our sociocultural worlds; although we may take ourselves to be describing structures of experience as such, we may always only be describing specific forms of experience, which may lean toward being those that are most culturally salient or dominant. But in being self-conscious about this inescapable condition of being-within-experience, phenomenology has a critical edge, insofar as it is aware that we must work *through* experience (as a therapist works through the patient's experience by cultivating a new relation within it); insofar as it knows that being situated within that heritage is needed for grasping it (see Simone de Beauvoir's comment on the angel: "an angel would be ill qualified to speak, would not understand all the givens of the problem" [Beauvoir 2011, 15]); and insofar as it knows that developing a critical orientation to our environment simply from where we are will likely reflect how things are rather than, as it aims at, how they should be.

2 In an article published after the completion of this essay, and hence too recently to engage with in detail, Ellie Anderson develops a similarly motivated phenomenological description of sexual experience and its

relevance for the issue of consent, drawing on phenomenological notions of embodied consciousness, operative intentionality, and direct perception (Anderson 2022).

**3** In their phenomenologically minded work on sexuality and sexual violation, Alcoff and Ann J. Cahill attend somewhat to cultivation of this ground. Alcoff explores briefly what intimate interaction can feel like in order to challenge “socially sanctioned heterosexual relations” (Alcoff 2018, 83). Our lived experience of sexual relations, she argues, “can overtake us with surprise. . . [and] feel more like a falling, a magnetic pull” (130–31); “our sexual subjectivity is interactive with others and our social environments. . . always in process, changing in relation to our experiences” (111). She argues that what requires preservation is thus itself dynamic: our “making capacities in regard to our sexual selves” (122). In a similar spirit, Cahill says about desire that it is not a stable or originary starting-point that exists prior to the interaction itself, but is inspired by interaction itself. Human beings, in her account, are “material entities marked by their interactions with others” (Cahill 2011, xii), and “what marks the ethical acceptability of any engagement. . . is not the presence or absence of desire, but rather the recognition of the parties involved of the relevance and efficacy of each other’s desire or lack of same” (Cahill 2014, 315). Her focus is also the actual experience of sexual interaction, from the unfolding of which (and not from the individual unit prior to its dynamic experience of another person) she draws a standard for ethically acceptable sex. In doing so, Cahill, like Alcoff, acknowledges the substantiality of interaction. Nevertheless, they mostly do not speak to the more basic, ontological presuppositions or roots of this view, which is the project of this article.

**4** See Drakopoulou 2007 for a rich historical analysis of the historically emergent idea of selfhood as separate, autonomous, and reflective, specifically in its relation to the discourse of consent.

**5** Here I will be building on Lisa Guenther’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “field” for a discussion of sexual difference (Guenther 2011).

**6** My focus is most centrally the models of sexuality and the problems of sexual violation related to sexist and heterosexist oppression, and thus those associated with a cissexual man–woman binary. The experience of those who inhabit positions that have been less culturally salient, however, will come to the fore especially in consideration of the social pressure brought to bear on the above binary, in relation to which Merleau-Ponty’s account is particularly rich (see also Guenther 2011; Burke 2017). Because of the nature of sexual being-in-the-world, “new” and “other” ways of and visions for being-in-the-world sexually transform those that inhabit the designation “traditional,” and can sometimes answer more robustly to the normative structure implied by sexuality as flesh.

**7** The idea of perceptual faith is the focus particularly of chapter 1 of *The Visible and the Invisible*. We emerge *from* this faith when we ask reflectively what is happening in experience, and thus catch merely a glimpse of this rapport, because, by being “a distinct act of recovery,” reflection introduces changes “into the spectacle,” making “use of powers obscure to” us (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 38). In the mode of what Merleau-Ponty calls “hyper-reflection,” however—which does not forget the change it introduces and “uses the significations of words to express, beyond themselves, our mute contact with the things when they are not yet things said” (38)—we can observe something of the character of this rapport.

**8** In a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “in the visible there is never anything but ruins of the spirit” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 180). This suggestive remark invites comparison with Derrida’s use of the term *ruin* in *Memoirs of the Blind* (Derrida 1993), who similarly argues that account-giving is a kind of loss of what is unfolding in our experience.

**9** Anderson similarly observes four valences of ambiguity in sexual experience: the human body as subject for self and object for others; embodied consciousness as reflective and prereflective; the body as cultural and biological; and the body as past, present, and future (Anderson 2022, 17). My discussion of the ambiguities of materiality and meaning and of self and other is related to the first three, though I would argue that the weight of the ambiguity between self and other is better registered by leaving the terms “subject” and “object” behind. See also Caleb Ward and Anderson’s phenomenological discussion of the self as “erotic object” (Anderson and Ward 2022).

**10** As Judith Butler observes, “the ‘I’ who sees is in some sense abandoned to the visible world, decentered in that world. . . the ‘I’ who touches is in some sense lost to the tactile world, never to regain itself completely. . . the ‘I’ who writes is possessed by a language whose meaning and effects are not originated in oneself” (Butler 2015, 162).

**11** Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of “syncretic sociability” to analyze our original intersubjectivity in “The Child’s Relations with Others” (Merleau-Ponty 2010).

12 Diprose uses Merleau-Ponty to talk about issues arising in the sexual domain, as well as to criticize law's orientation to the independent self-governance of personal property. My account here articulates different sexually relevant aspects of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh" and of Diprose's closely related notion of "corporeal generosity." Specifically, I believe there are separately discernible ambiguities arising here that merit independent attention, and I believe that her account of the levels of toleration that we have been intercorporeally cultivated to develop can themselves be articulated into two broad types in the sexual domain: the stance of withdrawal and the stance of control.

13 Even distorted forms of sexual interaction play out as interaction between attitudes or perspectives. In a situation of sexual aggression or rape, for instance, the aggressor can desire recognition from or annihilation of a perspective, but this perspective is still relevant. The "master" in Hegel's description does not recognize that it is this perspective that is significant to him, and misguidedly thinks he can shape it by mastering the other's physical body and exploiting the fear of physical death (Hegel 1977, §192). In the master's contradictory view is evident a confusion between the dimensions of physicality and of perspective, and a failure to recognize that what is desired is the other's confirmation. Cahill argues that "the subjectivity, the personhood, of the victim is crucial to the meaning of the act of rape. If the victim were truly stripped of all subjectivity . . . , then the experience of forcibly imposing his body and will upon her would have relatively little appeal" (Cahill 2011, 134). Cahill also invokes Hegel here: "But intersubjectivity is not so easily thrown off, as Hegel knew. The master needs the slave to be a master, and so the object can never be utterly objectified" (135).

14 Anderson explicates this point in her discussion of "operative intentionality" (Anderson 2022, 10).

15 That does not rule out the possibility that, as argues, it can be deeply pleasurable for us to be taken or to take someone else as a body or a "sex object" (Cahill 2011, xii; see also Anderson and Ward 2022).

16 See Burke 2017 for a discussion of love as a hollow.

17 Alcoff notes that "my sexuality emerges in intersubjective interaction, and my intentionality must be understood as both embodied and as having a temporal modality. I know what I want to do fully and with certainty only in the very moment I do it" (Alcoff 2018, 159).

18 See Russon 2009, especially chapter 4, for an account of sexuality as co-creation: "in erotic life, we feel the reality of sharing, of original, creative co-action" (Russon 2009, 75).

19 Thus it is somewhat problematic to say that sexually conservative people who aim to curtail the sexual behavior of others should just "mind their own business." Although their aims are wrongheaded, they are not wrong insofar as their position reflects this idea that desire and modes of sexual existence are "contagious."

20 See Susan Bredlau for discussion of this point: "while men tend to practice living their bodies as . . . 'hands'—as expressive—women tend to practice living their bodies as . . . 'skin'—as submissive" (Bredlau 2018, 83).

21 In a reading of Kristen Roupenian and Beauvoir, Filipa Melo Lopes develops an account of "feminine narcissism" and "masculine vanity" that together reflect a dynamic similar to the one I am describing (Lopes 2021).

22 In describing the after-effects of sexual violation, Alcoff remarks on the fact that those violated often feel guilt, shame, and self-blame for not having been savvier (Alcoff 2018, 119–20).

23 Restrictive cultural expectations and stereotypes can alienate men as much as women, though given that we inhabit a world that rewards activity and disregards the significant goods associated with receptivity, men are privileged in that world. Nonetheless, it is clearly true that opposition to these expectations and stereotypes of men is a matter of their liberation and goes hand-in-hand with the liberation of women.

24 Although independence, freedom, and autonomy are valued and valuable, they are an interpersonal accomplishment; they come to be through our interdependence, not vice versa.

25 I do not discuss this essay in detail, but Talia Bettcher's "When Selves Have Sex" explicitly thematizes what Merleau-Ponty calls "intertwining" in construing the erotic, gendered experience of self and the erotic experience of the other as "components on one and the same intimation track. It is not merely that Sheena eroticizes a female other and a female self, for example, but, rather, she specifically eroticizes female–female intimacy . . . Germaine [in turn] . . . has an erotic experience of herself as the sensory subject toward which Sheena moves through interpersonal space" (Bettcher 2014, 615).

26 John Russon observes that "because, for each of us, our most intimate desires are unique, there is no way to know . . . what specifically we want in sexuality, what specifically gives us pleasure, without learning that from each other singly. There is, in short, no 'general' answer to this question, no answer that is true for all.

The answer, rather, could only be found uniquely by us . . . through our unique and intimate interpersonal dialogue” (Russon 2016, 43–44).

**27** The possibilities for harm include preventing women from developing a culturally supported, free, and rich relationship to sexuality, and require feminist attempts “to expand the analysis of pleasure, and to draw on women’s energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger” (Vance 1984, 3).

**28** Four states have passed affirmative consent requirements for university and college campuses: California (Cal. Educ. Code §67386 (2015)), New York (N.Y. Educ. Law §6441 (2015)), Connecticut (H. B. No. 5376 (2016)), and Illinois (H. B. 0821 (2015)). Other American states are considering proposed bills (S. 387 (Haw. 2015); H.R. 667 (Md. 2014); H.R. 4903 (Mich. 2015); H.R. 1689 (Minn. 2015); S. 2478 (N.J. 2014); S. 474 (N.C. 2015).)

**29** As noted above, Alcoff remarks that “guidance about what counts as free, uncoerced, and desired sex should not be . . . modelled on those contexts and founded on those norms” (Alcoff 2018, 83).

**30** For defense of the norm of consent in rape law, see Estrich 1987; Dripps 1992; and Schulhofer 1998.

**31** Again, I cannot argue here for what specifically should be done in the legal-juridical domain; rather, I am arguing for a circumscription of its boundaries. The negotiation model may be a good candidate for navigating sexual violation in the legal-juridical domain. Lois Pineau argues for a model of sexual interaction called “communicative sexuality” in which there exists “an atmosphere of comfort and communication, a minimum of pressure, and an on-going checkup on one’s partner’s state” (Pineau 1989, 231). This may be a positive contribution to legal approaches to sexual assault and rape, but beyond the juridical domain it again requires supplementation by a phenomenological account of bodily intelligence and communication. Tanya Palmer criticizes the discourse of consent for its entanglement with an individualistic, liberal subject; it is inept, therefore, at responding “to the bodily, affective, and relational dimensions of sexual encounters” and “the variable and amorphous nature of sexual activity” (Palmer 2017, 11). She also argues that sexual offense laws obscure the convergence of mind and body and ignore wrongs against the body. These astute observations lead her to a standard for sexual offenses law that she calls “freedom to negotiate”: sexual encounters that are legitimate create and maintain a space in which negotiation can happen. Although perhaps a promising direction for law, however, a cultural shift seems demanded here, and “negotiation” is not a great term from the point of view of that shift. Palmer herself says that space to negotiate is what is needed “at a minimum” (24). I would add that thinking sexuality through the lens of negotiation, at least beyond the legal domain, already curtails its potential insofar as it posits independent, autonomous individuals whom interaction will not significantly change.

**32** Hirschmann argues the consent theory is structurally sexist, insofar as the “conceptualization of obligation in voluntarist terms . . . automatically preclude[s] women’s experience from being adequately encompassed and accurately expressed” (Hirschmann 1992, 21).

**33** Sara Ahmed observes, for instance, that even “spaces *have taken form by taking on [their] form*”—that is, the form of heterosexual bodies (Ahmed 2006, 92).

**34** Anderson and Ward similarly flag this problem, warning against construing speech as “the only reliable medium for making moral claims on one another” and characterizing “another’s bodily presence [as] a source of meaning or sense-making” (Anderson and Ward 2022, 65). In a wonderful book again encountered too recently to shape this paper, Katherine Angel asserts the importance of being able to sustain uncertainty regarding our own desire: “Desire is uncertain and unfolding, and this is unsettling... We must not insist on a sexual desire that is fixed and known in advance, in order to be safe. That would be to hold sexuality hostage to violence... Desire never exists in isolation. This is also what makes sex potentially exciting, rich and meaningful... We need to start from this very premise - this risky, complex premise: that we shouldn’t have to know ourselves in order to be safe from violence” (2021, 39–40).

**35** Our wanting and willing are nonetheless a part of the unfolding of our sexual experience, and thus, like Anderson (Anderson 2022), we may seek to redefine consent in a way that is not reductive of its rich ambiguities (theoretically speaking, we could call the phenomenon “consensuality” in order to bring out its pervasive and fluid character). I am skeptical of the idea that the prevalent resonance of the term *consent* could be destabilized, but it also seems right to push back on the way it is used reductively, and to contribute to a cultural shift that would sensualize communication and facilitate its integration into the sexual experience.

**36** Alcoff observes that there may be those without “self-regard strong enough to resist the accepted rules of engagement” (Alcoff 2018, 7), who give consent to avoid “violence, discord, or the loss of vital relationships” (77). Consent “can be manipulated under all too common conditions of constraint” (127).

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**Shannon Hoff** is Associate Professor of philosophy at Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. She is author of *The Laws of the Spirit: A Hegelian Theory of Justice* (SUNY Press, 2014) and has published numerous articles in continental philosophy, political philosophy, and feminism.