

## **The case for a non-essentialist feminist collectivity**

**An exploration into conceptions of feminist subjectivity and collectivity**

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## Introduction

In some sense, it can be said that women today have it better than ever. The feminist movement through its first, second, third, and arguably now also fourth wave, has occupied significant space in the public debate since the mid-1800s, and has over the years achieved progress on a wide range of issues pertaining to gender equality. The renowned suffragettes, heroes of the so-called first wave of feminism, were active throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mainly fighting for women's right to vote. This necessitated the formal recognition of women as fully-fledged human beings, an important early step for the movement. As with most things in life, the celebration of this achievement was short-lived. Since patriarchal values were, and still are, so deeply rooted in the way we function as a society, tackling one important issue simply lays bare a multitude of other challenges to face. The successive feminist waves preoccupied themselves with an ever-widening variety of issues, which permeate every layer of society<sup>1</sup>. Though we have come a long way, this statement still bares relevance today, even in our most emancipated societies. It is easy to point to the failings of lesser developed countries, in which women often still hold significantly little social and economic power. However, even in the so-called developed countries, where we do not tend to experience the same blatant displays of gender discrimination, we are still faced with a pay gap, glass ceiling, traditional family values, sexual harassment and other issues which disproportionately affect women. As the achievements of the feminist movement accumulate over time, we are constantly faced with newly visible ways in which deeply engrained patriarchal norms manifest themselves. It is therefore no surprise that we are left with today's highly diversified, or as some might even say fractured, feminist movement.

Such apparent fragmentation particularly set in during what is generally referred to as feminism's third wave, though there exist no real, broadly accepted definitions of these alleged waves. According to Elizabeth Evans, third-wave feminists, as a continuation of the second wave's attack on existing power relations, became predominantly preoccupied with questions surrounding identity and its implications on subjects' positions in society, in an attempt to reclaim and redefine notions of, for example, femininity and girliness<sup>2</sup>. This, however, was not a development that was distinctive only for feminism, as the concept of identity gained popularity within most social movements at that time. Ultimately, these developments of the

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Brunell, 'Feminism' accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism> on 5 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Evans, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US* (London: Palgrave Mcmillian, 2015).

late 20<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for what we have now come to refer to as identity politics, which has for most of its existence been met with skepticism surrounding the ways in which identities came to be defined, often still along limited, and limiting socio-political dimensions. It is therefore unsurprising that the increased prominence of identity politics came paired with a movement, which aimed at compensating for its theoretical shortcomings, namely intersectionality. The aim of intersectional thinking revolved around fostering inclusive views of the different dimensions of identity, which include gender, as well as race, class, sexuality, religion, ability, and more<sup>3</sup>.

Though the exploration into our conception of identity has allowed the feminist movement to move beyond some of its past limitations, this development has also often been met with legitimate criticism. It remains difficult to develop a perspective in which individual subjectivity and social collectivity are considered in a balanced narrative, which doesn't succumb to either an essentialist, or an overly depoliticized approach. Whilst identity politics and intersectionality developed in relation to each other, it appears that they have come to be seen as somewhat mutually exclusive, mostly serving as ways to criticize each other, thereby losing the transformative potential of their relationship. In this thesis, I will explore the development of a point of view, which can embrace elements of both theoretical frameworks through a discussion surrounding the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. First, I will lay out the origin and use of employing theoretical frameworks such as identity politics and intersectionality within the feminist movement. Subsequently, I will explore limitations of these approaches at the hand of the discussion laid out in *Feminist Contentions*. Using the theory emerging from the debate regarding the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, which is explored in this collection of essays, I will provide an evaluation of identity politics and intersectionality in the context of this ongoing feminist discussion. In the final chapter, I will attempt to lay out a perspective considering the positive and negative aspects of the positions I will have outlined. Ultimately, the goal is for my perspective to adequately address the issues faced by subjects in today's highly complex society, in a framework that simultaneously takes into account both their individual subjectivity, as well as their position within a social collective. I will put forward the argument that Sartre's concept of *Serialité*, combined with Iris Marion Young's feminist reading of it, provides a promising conceptual framework through which feminist issues can be adequately approached and addressed. In order to better illustrate the practical relevance of this theory, I will apply it in an analysis of the 2019

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<sup>3</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* (1990) 1241-1300.

movie *The Assistant* by Kitty Green, a movie about the #MeToo movement, which provides a look into the daily life of the assistant of a powerful film production company executive. My analysis of this movie will therefore exemplify the relevance of critical cultural products such as these, as well as commenting on the movie industry at large and identifying some of its problematic aspects.

## The question of identity

As mentioned above, one of the increasingly contested ideas within feminism is the concept of identity, and its role in the struggle for emancipation. Identity, much like the concept of the subject itself, has become analyzed in terms of its philosophical status, the nature of personal identity or group identities, the ways in which we can analyze and understand identity as a personal choice or a product of socio-political circumstances. To feminism, these questions become particularly valuable when linking them to the way in which societal processes and expectations are guided by socially constructed and imposed matrices of identity, specifically gender identity. Feminist thinkers have been particularly concerned with the limitations of the heteronormative gender binary, as normalized in our society, yet provides a restricted perspective on the ways in which gender operates or ought to operate. Traditionally, gender identity was solely considered in terms of its physical biological status, as being determined by one's reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics, however twentieth century feminists have consistently challenged this biological deterministic view. Simone de Beauvoir is one of the earliest feminist thinkers to do so by incorporating socio-political elements in her analysis of the way in which gender identities are shaped. When writing: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."<sup>4</sup>, Beauvoir touches upon the idea that gender identity is something we acquire through socialization, by the adoption of specific behavioral traits, rather than something we are innately born with. A later development of this conception of gender as being socialized, gives rise to what we call the sex-gender distinction, which has played a significant role in shaping today's feminist theory. Within this framework, sex has come to refer to the distinction of physical/biological traits of subjects. Gender, on the other hand, has come to encompass the aspect of identity, which is imposed on, and adopted by, subjects through social norms and practices.<sup>5</sup> Despite losing some relevance in today's debate, this shift in thinking has enabled feminists to criticize the problematic aspects of gender norms, by analyzing the relation between the social processes which enable/create these oppressive circumstances and the affected subjects. The #MeToo movement, for example, represented a significant break with the imposed, adopted and continuously reproduced behaviors of men and women in the movie industry. Women, under the banner of the movement, were allowed space in which to speak of

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<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L'expérience vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Haslanger, 'Ontology and Social Construction', *Philosophical Topics* (1995), 95-125

their experiences and contest the norms which had long been taken for granted, thereby denaturalizing the existing hierarchy which had become firmly rooted in the industry.

### The Rise of Identity Politics

Out of this preoccupation with the concept of identity, which reaches far beyond the scope of the feminist undertaking, has grown a new current within socio-political theory, namely identity politics. Though this term refers to a broad range of positions within social and political sciences and can therefore not be identified through a single definition, there are overarching principles which drive the movements within identity politics. Sometimes also referred to as the 'politics of recognition', identity politics generally aims at fostering a narrative wherein differences between subjects and their experiences are recognized and embraced, rather than erased through essentialized narratives<sup>6</sup>. This need for recognition has grown out of the increasing discontent with the exclusionary effects of the more traditional, and essentialized ways of approaching concepts such as that of identity. With the rise of terms such as 'LGBTQ+' and 'BIPOC', we can see an attempt to compensate for the exclusionary language and practices which foster oppression, by adopting highly inclusive terminology. Minorities who had previously been left out of the socio-political narratives dictated by hegemonies such as the patriarchy, are hereby provided with a space in which their identity is recognized, and the issues which accompany it are acknowledged. Important to note is the fact that identities, within identity politics, tend to be attributed or adopted not on the basis of biological characteristics, but rather based on a subject's relation to society. In this way, movements, such as the feminist one, are able to develop a narrative which isn't grounded in biological determinism but rather focuses on the identities within their socio-political context. One does not identify as a woman because they possess traditionally female anatomy, but rather through their relation to the world around them<sup>7</sup>. This is an important step in further breaking down the binary ways of thinking about concepts such as gender in order to adopt a more inclusive stance on empowerment.

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, participation', *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung Discussion Paper* (1998) 98-108.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Bernstein, 'Identity Politics', *Annual Review of Sociology* (2005) 47-74.

### The Rise of Intersectionality

Interestingly, along with the rising prominence of identity politics came the development of another highly influential concept within the world of emancipatory movements and their examination of the concept of identity, namely intersectionality. The term was originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which gender and race operate through overlapping forces of discrimination, focusing mainly on the experiences of black women, who had systematically been left out of both the feminist and anti-racist narratives. By failing to address elements of white supremacy within feminism, it had become a movement primarily aimed at liberating white women, thereby disregarding the situations of racialized women. Similarly, the effects of the patriarchy were left out of the narrative of the black liberation movement, which made it blind to the fact that it was mostly representing black men and their experiences<sup>8</sup>. Crenshaw hereby illustrates the danger of reducing subjects to their supposed identity, as any categorization as such causes the exclusion of anyone who doesn't quite fit the bill. Intersectionality therefore offers a critique of the exclusionary effects of approaches such as identity politics. Though identity politics isn't innately problematic in its aim, Crenshaw expresses the shortcomings of the way in which identities are imposed on subjects through such narratives. According to her we ought to consider these identities and their societal consequences not as singular and mutually exclusive categories, but rather as intersecting axes, which bring composite forms of discrimination based on, for example, gender, race, class and sexuality. Understanding the ways in which these characteristics intersect, illustrates the wide array of experiences of discrimination which exist, without unnecessarily reducing them to singular identities.

It is thus unsurprising that intersectionality often is analyzed through its relation to postmodernism, since both involve the deconstruction of certain concepts previously taken for granted. Kathy Davis explains that intersectionality was welcomed by postmodern thinkers, as it provided an approach to identity which allowed to break with the essentialist gender binary, feminist theorists were eager to combat. As intersectionality provides a framework for combining and recombining elements of subject's identities in order to provide a comprehensive and contextualized overview of their positions in society, it allowed for a less

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<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins'.



static and thereby less problematic understanding of identity. This process is somewhat reminiscent of Foucault's views on power, which reflect dynamic and ever-shifting power relations between subjects, preventing such relations from becoming normalized and thereby constricting to these subjects in question<sup>9</sup>. Through an intersectional approach, we are able to foster more inclusive narratives within emancipatory movements, as well as better understanding the ways in which injustice functions at the hand of socio-political power relations. Important in all of this is the fact that these movements, which aim to liberate subjects from their constricted positions in society, ought to continuously foster solidarity and inclusivity, as opposed to alienating subjects from each other. It is therefore important to employ intersectionality in order to identify and understand the broader socio-political processes which place subjects in problematic hierarchical positions.

Despite being an integral part of the way in which we understand emancipation today, identity remains a highly contested concept, as along with the increased prominence of identity-based ways of thinking, the efficacy of its use has repeatedly been questioned. The adoption of identity politics and intersectionality within third-wave feminism (and any subsequent versions of the movement, as well as most other emancipatory movements) has allowed the further development of an anti-essentialist stance towards perspectives on gender and identity. However, as with anything, it remains important to maintain a critical stance towards approaches which have a significant influence on the way in which we understand societal processes, which are innately highly complex. Emancipatory undertakings ought to ultimately aim to foster solidarity within and between different socio-political movements. The danger of promoting strict identity-based thinking, whether it be intersectional or not, is that it tends to be lacking in its power to allow subjects to relate to each other and approach these broader societal issues in solidarity. At the hand of postmodern and critical theory, I will proceed to evaluate the more problematic aspects of these approaches to understanding identity and its relation to emancipation.

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<sup>9</sup> Kathy Davis, 'Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful', *Feminist Theory* (2008) 67-85.

## **A Postmodern framework**

In *Feminist Contentions* we follow a theoretical debate between some of today's leading feminist theorists, namely Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser. Originally invited to participate in a symposium on the relation between feminism and postmodernism, they were later asked to lay out some of their thoughts on the subject in a series of essays, drawing in other important discussion points such as the role of critical theory or the status of the subject in feminist theory. Though these thinkers were not primarily preoccupied with the role of identity politics or intersectionality in the context of feminism, the positions they laid out provide a comprehensive theoretical framework, which I believe heavily touches upon questions surrounding the relationship between identity politics and intersectional thinking and their impact on emancipatory movements such as feminism. In this chapter I will therefore delve into the theoretical positions emerging from the debate, in an attempt to critically evaluate the relationship between feminism and the question of identity.

### Benhabib: a critical theory approach

Benhabib opens up the debate with an essay in which she analyses the ways reigning western philosophical traditions have come under attack by emancipatory movements in an attempt to develop a more inclusive narrative. According to her, this critique is justified, as dominant philosophical movements such as Postmodernism do hold problematic views and assumptions, which can work counter productively for emancipatory movements. This, however, does not imply that all aspects of postmodernism are problematic for, for example feminism. She therefore posits the idea that the three central postmodernist theses can be expressed in either weak formulations, which uphold the aspects of postmodernism which can be of use to feminist thinkers and should not necessarily be undermined through this critique, and strong formulations, generally too essentialist, and thus work counter-productively to the feminist undertaking<sup>10</sup>. Herewith, she lays the groundwork for a critical analysis of the way in which postmodern thinking and subsequent theoretical movements, such as the above-mentioned identity politics and intersectionality, contain both constructive and destructive elements.

She firstly tackles "The death of man" thesis, which according to her, is useful to feminism insofar as it attempts to do away the western notion of a transcendent subject, and

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<sup>10</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminism and Postmodernism' in *Feminist Contentions* (London: Routledge, 1995) 17-34..

rather focuses on subjects as situated within a specific social, historical and linguistic context. According to Benhabib, this opens up a space for feminists to do away with the normalized, male-centric way of thinking in which there is no space for otherness, and therefore no space for the feminine perspective. However, as Benhabib warns, the danger of the strong formulation of “the death of man” thesis is that by breaking down the concept of a transcendent subject we are at risk of removing all subjectivity and therewith also ideas of accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy. Without these concepts, the subject simply becomes another position in language, with no ability to alter, or therefore improve, its own situation, thereby leaving it without subjectivity<sup>11</sup>.

“The Death of History” thesis, in its weak formulation, refers to the abandonment of the idea of a universal, monocausal history. Much like ‘the Subject’, history had throughout modernity been seen as transcendental, thereby lacking any attention for the situatedness of subject and its experience. This tends to lead to the exclusion of the perspectives of minorities, such as women, as the historical narrative is told through a stable, singular point of view. Importantly for feminism, postmodernist thinkers attempted to debunk this idea and reframe history as a contingent field of experience without singular grand narratives. The challenge herein consists of re-establishing a relationship between politics and history that isn’t, once again, dominated by one specific perspective, for instance that of feminism. Therefore, according to Benhabib, the strong formulation of this thesis is imbued with people’s proneness to recreating new grand narratives to replace the ones they tried getting rid of in the first place. In doing so, we are not combatting the essentializing nature of such perspectives, thereby perpetuating a tradition through which many subjects find themselves excluded from the dominant narrative<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, Benhabib discusses the “Death of Metaphysics” thesis, which, in its weak formulation reflects the postmodernists’ attack on the enlightenment search for truth through rationality. According to them, philosophy can no longer be seen as a superior mechanism for finding truth, as there is no transcendental truth about the world, at least not one that we can know, and therefore preoccupy ourselves with. This does not, however, insinuate that philosophy as a whole is useless, as according to Benhabib’s, the strong formulation of this thesis seems to claim. She emphasizes the need for higher-order principles such as philosophy, in order to assist us in resolving conflicts between norms and cultural values, ultimately allowing for social progress.

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<sup>11</sup> Benhabib, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism’.

<sup>12</sup> Benhabib, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism’.

By separating the weak and strong formulations from each other, Benhabib is able to pick and choose the aspects of postmodern theory that she deems useful for the feminist movement, all the whilst avoiding the pitfalls of postmodernist thinking, which, at times, can make it unreconcilable with feminism. The importance here is to find the balance between subjectivity and, in a sense, objectivity, in order to leave room for critical theory within the field of feminism<sup>13</sup>.

#### Butler: a poststructuralist approach

Butler, in her essay, formulates a reply to Benhabib, in which she points her attention to the theoretical foundations and conceptual apparatus that are used in discussions such as these. She emphasizes the importance of understanding where concepts, such as ‘postmodernism’, ‘the subject’, or ‘identity’, come from, how they have been formed in our understanding, and in which context they exist. Her attempt hereby is to politicize the terminology that is being used within the debate and put into question its ontological status. This, in itself can be seen as a postmodern, or as Butler prefers, a poststructuralist approach. Rather than taking such terminology for granted, she advocates for the incorporation of conceptual foundations within the discussion itself, thereby leaving room for re-signification<sup>14</sup>. Simply put, Butler argues that we are continuously making implicit metaphysical commitments within theoretical discussions of any kind. This, according to her, isn’t necessarily problematic, as long as we remain aware of this essentializing mechanism and incorporate discussions regarding the origin and context of theory within broader discussions. One concept which she attempts to tackle is that of the authorial “I”, or ‘the subject’, traditionally a central concept within philosophy and criticized in postmodern theory. As Benhabib had alluded to, postmodernism, at least in its strong form, runs the risk of producing a subject with no subjectivity. Butler, however, argues that the de-essentialization of the subject does not imply its loss of subjectivity, but rather indicates its need to be placed within a new subjectivity. The concept of the subject ought not to be wholly rejected but should be understood as constituted through history and treated as a site of potential contest, in which its conceptual boundaries are not rigid and essentialized but rather flexible and inclusive. What relevance does this then bare to the feminist movement? Butler argues that we ought to treat concepts such as ‘woman’ similarly. The use of rigid concepts and categories instills unrealistic symbolic requirements for subjects to belong to them, which indicates that

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<sup>13</sup> Benhabib, *Feminism and Postmodernism*.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Contingent Foundations’ in *Feminist Contentions* (London: Routledge, 1995) 35-58.

any emancipatory efforts on the basis of such ideas is bound to work exclusively, rather than inclusively. Much like with the 'subject', Butler therefore argues that concepts such as 'woman' ought to remain contestable, thereby allowing for a broader, more inclusive view on gender identity and its role in society. Through this analysis, Butler uses Benhabib's strong formulation of "the Death of Man" and flips it on itself, such that it doesn't prevent subjectivity, but rather enables it through a continuously self-reflexive process.<sup>15</sup>

#### Fraser: a 'middle-ground' approach

According to Fraser, the two first essays ultimately revolve around the question of whether feminism should ally itself with Critical Theory, or rather Postmodernism. This, she argues, is not the question they should be asking themselves, as she does not believe both fields to be so strictly mutually exclusive. As the title of her essay suggests, she considers that Benhabib and Butler are developing their arguments on the basis of false antitheses, or unnecessary conceptual exclusions, through which any possibility for a middle-ground compromise is overlooked. Benhabib, according to Fraser, has been too limiting in the development of her strong and weak theses, providing only one interpretation for each, and thus drawing ungrounded conclusions on the nature of concepts such as the subject, history, philosophy, and their role in social progress. Fraser does however somewhat align herself with Benhabib, as she too reaches the conclusion that postmodernism does indeed run the danger of inhibiting the potential for critical theory, which according to her, uniquely provides tools for achieving social progress, as it importantly allows us to make value judgments, thereby discerning positive thought developments from negative, or counter-productive ones. This is important, in order to continuously allow for the evaluation of societal developments brought on by the feminist undertaking<sup>16</sup>. Fraser then expands on this by turning to Butler, who has rather allied herself with what we can now call a 'strong' postmodern, or poststructuralist view. Fraser points out that the term 'resignification', which Butler coined as a preferable alternative to 'critique', carries positive connotations, regardless of whether or not the outcomes of its processes are truly positive. Poststructuralist thinking therefore lacks a higher-order principle, which ought to help us determine what developments bare positive or negative consequences, and thus which developments are worthwhile<sup>17</sup>. Without laying out an overly specific conclusion, Fraser seems

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, 'Contingent Foundations'.

<sup>16</sup> Benhabib, 'Feminism and Postmodernism'.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'False Antitheses' in *Feminist Contentions* (London: Routledge, 1995) 59-74.

to attempt to nudge both sides of the discussion to a more central position, in which valuable elements from both critical theory and poststructuralism can and should be adopted within feminism, as they are, according to her, not necessarily mutually exclusive.

### Cornell on fantasy and lived experience

Cornell, finally, offers her take on the debate in an essay which stands relatively independent from the others. Leaning heavily on her psychoanalytic influences, she brings up the need for an 'ethical attitude', which refers to the adoption of a non-violent relationship with the 'other', being that which falls outside of our system of meaning. This touches upon another central point in Cornell's argument, which entails that there exists a gap between the way in which a subject is seen within society and its lived experience. The reigning gender hierarchy, for example, is built on preconceptions we have of what it means to be a man or a woman within society, which according to Cornell may as well be referred to as fantasies. In this sense, fantasies take on the form of internalized societal preconceptions and expectations, or what Butler would call essentialized conceptions of identity, which shape our relation to other subjects and the external world. Though fantasies do impact the experiences of subjects, they innately offer imperfect representations of what it means to, for example, be a woman. In contrast, lived experience, refers to the subject's actual life, in which its everyday experiences in society are not only impacted by the largely unrepresentative position of their identity, but also by a range of other societal processes. The concept herewith points to the complex nature of the subject's place in society, which is impacted by much more than simply identity-based prejudices. Leaning more towards Butler's approach, Cornell calls for a resignification of such essentialist fantasies, in order to redefine social relationships. According to her and her psychoanalytically driven point of view, the potential for progress lies in the gap that exists between this fantasy and lived experience, where reality disconnects with our expectations of it. By exposing the discrepancies between these, we can challenge the seemingly arbitrary boundaries that have been established, and hopefully work towards an increasingly inclusive attitude in society.

## The Pitfalls of Identity Thinking

One of the central inquiries which we see emerge from the debate summarized above regards the relationship between postmodernism and critical theory in the context of emancipatory movements such as feminism. This is a complicated theoretical relationship, which I believe can nicely be paralleled to the more contemporary discussion surrounding the relationship between identity politics and intersectionality I touched upon at the beginning of this thesis. Though I have outlined the ways in which both these approaches have helped feminism, as well as other emancipatory movements, in achieving positive change, it is important to note that both approaches have always been met with legitimate criticism and concerns regarding their efficacy. Much of this criticism is grounded in comparable theoretical frameworks to those employed by the thinkers included in *Feminist Contentions*. Therefore, I will use my understanding of this debate to evaluate the elements of identity politics and intersectionality which ought to be adopted or rejected by feminists, in order to avoid some of its pitfalls and more effectively fight for women's emancipation. Fraser, according to me, provides a particularly helpful take on this, as she abstains from really picking a side within the debate, rather arguing for the necessity of a common-ground position between the opposing sides. Ultimately, as Benhabib also made clear in her essay, using any theoretical framework in a formulation that is too strong runs the risk of becoming once again limiting to the transformative power of socio-political movements. It is therefore important to follow Fraser's call for identifying the useful elements of such frameworks and adopting those in a multifaceted approach to emancipation.

At first glance, it may appear that identity politics' practice of breaking down broad categories into more specific and inclusive ones by analyzing their socio-economic constitution, reflects some of the same approach used by poststructuralist thinkers. However, as we saw in her chapter in *Feminist Contentions*, Butler appears weary of the use of any categories at all, as she emphasizes the importance of questioning the ontological status of the concepts we use. According to her, the use of essentializing concepts is unavoidable, and attempting to remove or further define these terms should therefore not be the primary undertaking of social movements. What really matters is fostering an awareness of the ways in which these concepts function as essentializing, thereby providing space for these effects to be corrected within the

discussion<sup>18</sup>. We can hereby understand the way in which, according to a poststructuralist critique, identity politics by itself, fails to address the real issues underlining inequalities in subjects' positions in society. Defining an increasing amount of different identities doesn't efface the issue of essentialism, but rather runs the risk of reinforcing it through an increased focus on categorization, with the danger of robbing people of their subjectivity once more<sup>19</sup>. This does not reflect the ontologically critical stance Butler called for in her essay, as she might argue it ultimately serves as a distraction from the real issue at hand.

Poststructuralists aren't however the only ones to identify the problematic elements of identity politics. Fraser, who also wrote the last chapter in *Feminist Contentions*, pointed out that rather than focusing on the ontological nature of terminology, many emancipatory movements have rather become concerned with appropriating these terms and defining their subsequent relationship to different forms of identity, much like the way in which identity politics functions. We see this happen, for example, with the LGBTQ+ movement. Originally named the LGBT movement, it has over the years adopted a flurry of new terms in its name, in order to represent a seemingly never-ending categorization of sexual identities. However, as she points out, it seems that the linguistic turn and postmodernism aren't as theoretically far removed from each other as they may appear. She therefore reframes the discussion as one concerning the relationship between feminism and the linguistic turn, through postmodernism, in which the goal ought to be to identify the useful elements of each perspective, rather than solely pitting them against each other as mutually incompatible. As gender relations, along with many other forms of power relations and stratification, permeate most aspects of society, they necessitate a broad and complex theoretical framework<sup>20</sup>. Intersectional thinking is, as mentioned before, a useful tool in bridging some of these theoretical gaps left by identity politics, however, as we saw in Benhabib's critique of a poststructuralist approach, it is important to remember that the limitations presented by single axis socio-political analysis are not automatically resolved when adding more axes through which to analyze the effects of discrimination. The categories used even within intersectional analysis are problematic in themselves, and ultimately run the risk of producing a subject without real subjectivity. The proliferation of intersectionality as a dominant method is therefore likely to result in an endless subdivision of subjects' experiences of injustice, until we lose the capacity to draw important, macro-level conclusions about the ways in which oppression functions. Interestingly, a possible

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, 'Contingent Foundations'.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, 'Contingent Foundations'.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser, 'False Antitheses'.



result of this highly individualizing approach is a subject which is largely depoliticized and can only really tell us anything about its specific experience of discrimination. Ultimately, this individualization of experience leaves minority groups with no ground upon which to organize themselves in order to challenge the hegemonic socio-political processes which disadvantages them. We can thus understand the process of intersectional thinking as an extension of poststructural thought, in which broad views of discrimination are replaced with increasingly individualistic and subject-specific accounts of it. Thereby, we run the danger of leaving the broader societal forces which create such situations of injustice out of the picture, minimizing our chances of adequately challenging them. Cornell had already touched upon this when arguing that we ought to develop an ethical attitude towards the other, as opposed to increasing feelings of alienation between subjects.

However, this critique of intersectionality does not imply that we should abandon it altogether. As we previously saw, the original intentions behind intersectionality, as well as identity politics for that matter, aimed to correct the exclusionary elements of the current socio-political narrative. As Fraser might argue, though these approaches don't present a perfect narrative, it is important to identify the useful elements of these approaches in order to adopt them into our theorization of discrimination, all the whilst remaining aware of potential pitfalls<sup>21</sup>. We therefore need to avoid framing such approaches from being mutually exclusive, but rather create a perspective in which they work together to bring out the best in each other. The difficulty with this lies in the fact that an analysis of such complex systems requires a framework which encompasses analyses of both broader societal processes and power relations, as well as specific and more individual experiences. If we can understand the ways in which subjects are constituted by their position in society, as well as constitutive of their situation, we may be able to identify the interconnected forces which are constitutive of situations of injustice in society.

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<sup>21</sup> Fraser, 'False Antitheses'.

## The Contemporary Feminist Subject

Whilst the positions outlined above address ideas which are still unresolved, and clearly bare relevance to the feminist undertaking, it is important to acknowledge the different context within which the subject of feminism finds itself in today's society, further complicating the task at hand. In *Feminist Experiences* Johanna Oksala takes on the challenge of establishing a new form of feminist philosophy, which borrows elements from both poststructuralism and phenomenology, thereby attempting to avoid their respective theoretical pitfalls. This locates her theory in the extension of the debate elucidated in *Feminist Contentions*, discussed in previous chapters. On the one hand, Oksala is critical of poststructuralism, in the sense that she perceives it as potentially rendering the subject unpolitical, a concern we previously saw raised by both Benhabib and Fraser. If the concept of woman were to be fully deconstructed through postmodern critique, it leaves women with no theoretical grounds upon which to organize themselves in order to combat the hegemonic patriarchal values that rule society. Furthermore, Oksala criticizes the lack of emphasis on experience within postmodern thought, which is where her long-term affiliation with phenomenology shines through. She accuses postmodernism of having shifted the focus of feminism away from the realm of experience, thereby implying that the situation of a subject can solely be understood through its socio-historical position<sup>22</sup>. As Cornell had also argued, lived experience remains an important dimension within our discussions of emancipation<sup>23</sup>. In an attempt to resolve this tension between postmodernism and phenomenology, which she both perceives to be potentially theoretically valuable to the feminist movement, Oksala aims to reintroduce the idea of experience as an independent concept worth exploring. Like Cornell, Oksala advocates for the importance of an awareness of the gap that exists between lived experience and the discourse through which it is observed or understood. This gap provides space for contestation and critique, through which power relations can be understood, resisted, and even transformed. Since experience tends to serve as a vehicle for the perpetuation of oppressive power relations, it can, according to her also be used to deconstruct them<sup>24</sup>.

Furthermore, as Fraser had correctly identified, the discussion in *Feminist Contentions*, ultimately seems to revolve around the use of language as a vehicle for emancipation, thereby aligning itself with the narrative of the linguistic turn. However, as we have just seen, this

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<sup>22</sup> Johanna Oksala, *Feminist Experiences* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Drucilla Cornell, 'What is Ethical Feminism?' in *Feminist Contentions* (London: Routledge, 1995) 75-106.

<sup>24</sup> Oksala, *Feminist Experiences*.

discussion can no longer be evaluated solely through this linguistic point of view, in which lived experience and other elements of the subject's life are absent. Oksala offers a contemporary analysis of the position of the feminist subject. According to her, women are no longer solely oppressed by, for example the patriarchal values of our society, but have, along with almost everyone else, also come to be shaped as Neoliberalist subjects. We see, for example, that economic processes such as neoliberal capitalism have come to act as particularly dominant forces within our society today. Patriarchal powers are herein still at play but have become internalized by women themselves, turning them into self-policing subjects, who strive to reflect the socially desired and auto-internalized identity of women as being sexually desiring and desired. We can better understand the implications of this development by looking at the #MeToo movement and the context within which it erupted. Though a significant portion of the narrative justly focused on the problematic position of men within the movie industry, we should not ignore the responsibility of women in the establishment and perpetuation of the values which uphold this system. They too are complicit in the normalization of certain behaviors and processes within the industry by playing into them and using them their own benefit. We should therefore not understand women solely as victims of #MeToo, but we should analyze the movement in such a way that we recognize women to be partially constitutive to their own situation as well.

According to Oksala, the neoliberal subject of feminism sees itself as free and able to make its own choices in pursuit of its personal desires. Thereby, they are no longer made out to be docile and compliant companions of men, but rather as social subjects motivated by the pursuit of supposed personal interests. This could be seen as a progressive development for women, in which they have been able to establish themselves as fully fledged, emancipated subjects in our society, who can think and make decisions based on their personal interests, rather than those of their male counterparts. However, Oksala offers the counterargument that women have rather also become absorbed into the neoliberal, capitalistically driven ideology, in which their supposedly personal desires are guided by ideals of economic success and power. Within this ideology, the emancipatory power no longer lies in an action itself, but rather the perception of whether it was the result of a personal decision<sup>25</sup>. If a woman chooses to wear makeup because it personally brings her confidence, rather than to meet patriarchal standards of beauty, it is not considered an anti-feministic act. However, the question remains whether these behaviors can really be considered to result from personal and empowered decisions, or

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<sup>25</sup> Oksala, *Feminist Experiences*.

rather as economically motivated behavior aimed at achieving greater success in life. As Oksala states: “The neoliberal subject views feminine appearance as well as her own body increasingly as an investment for getting the returns she wants.”<sup>26</sup> Women are no longer simply disciplined by the patriarchy in order to behave according to men’s expectations, but these patriarchal values have become internalized in the neoliberal logic of our society and serve as ways to socially sanction or reward women through a capitalistic rationality. Under the guise of personal agency, the systemic effects of the neoliberal attitude are rendered increasingly powerful, whilst at the same time remaining largely unnoticed and thereby all the more dangerous. All of this, however, does not imply that traditional conceptions of women’s role in society, which include ideas such as the reliance on women as being household laborers or primary care givers, no longer exist. These powers are rather both present at the same time, thereby making the position of women in today’s society ever so complicated to pin down and transform. Instead of getting caught up in essentializing narratives which try to identify all the ways in which women are oppressed for being women, we ought to theorize women as fully-fledged subjects. This entails that we also take into consideration their actual lived experiences, without it being imbued with preconceptions about the experience of the female subject. This will allow us to better understand how, particularly in our day and age, problematic narratives and ideologies are not only imposed on, but also adopted, reproduced and thus upheld through female behavior. An analysis which is able to identify the gap between this lived experience and the constructed narratives around a subject’s experience will allow for a critical evaluation of the power relations at play.

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<sup>26</sup> Oksala *Feminist Experiences*, 124.

## **Seriality as an Alternative**

It appears that the analysis presented above, in a somewhat oversimplified view, ultimately boils down to the relationship between identity politics and intersectionality within emancipatory movements today. The dangers of essentialization and exclusion which exist within identity politics as the result of shortcomings of our analysis of the linguistic turn, can potentially be counteracted with an intersectional approach. However, intersectionality presents limitations of its own, as we have found that it runs the danger of rendering subjects unpolitical, and thereby unable to unite against the oppressive powers of society, which have furthermore become increasingly complex and deeply engrained. As Fraser had usefully pointed out in her approach, we ought not to disregard these theories on the basis of their shortcomings, but rather should aim to identify the respective elements which can counteract these deficiencies. In doing so, we can formulate a theoretical framework which avoids such downfalls, and adequately supports the feminist undertaking in a contemporary context.

### The theory of seriality

In 1994 already, Iris Marion Young provides an interesting take on the issue regarding the use of essentialist categories such as “woman” and the strengths and pitfalls this entails for the feminist movement. She approaches the topic similarly to the contributors in *Feminist Contentions*, as she starts by questioning the way in which such categories are created and used. The basis of her argument lies in her discreditation of ‘theories’ or ‘social theories’. These, according to her, are attempts to provide universalized systemic accounts and explanations of social relations, which ultimately bare little relevance when applied to specific cases. She believes we should rather engage in ‘pragmatic theorizing’, by developing theory which encompasses specific issues, rather than aiming for broadly descriptive, yet unproductive accounts of society at large. Using this approach, she evaluates both the positive and negative implications of the conceptualization of women as a group. She argues that we require a position which allows for the grouping together of women without working with constrictive categories, which prevent us from recognizing the broad range of female lived experience. However, without any kind of concept of women as a social collective, the feminist movement topples over<sup>27</sup>. We arrive here at a similar position to the one Fraser adopted in her essay, and

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<sup>27</sup> Iris Marion Young, ‘Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1994) 713-738.

which I have further extrapolated throughout this thesis. The aim is to arrive at a middle-ground position, which simultaneously takes into account individual subjectivity, as well as social collectivity.

Surprisingly, Jean-Paul Sartre hereby provides her with a useful concept, namely that of ‘Seriality’. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he reflects upon the nature of social collectivity and the different levels at which it manifests itself. Sartre distinguishes between groups and series, as forms of social collectivity each operating with different levels of internal complexity and reflexivity. A group, according to him, consists of subjects who self-consciously acknowledge having a common goal and therefore actively ally themselves with each other. A series, however, consists of subjects who are in some sense more passively unified. This can happen either through a commonality in objects around which they orient personal actions, or as the materialized results of others’ actions<sup>28</sup>. Concretely, this entails that a series takes shape when subjects pursue their own personal goals, and thereby are conditioned by the same objects or symbolic environment as others, rather than by common traits or goals. This series-formation, according to Sartre, takes place within what he calls the ‘milieu of action’, which is shaped externally by the collectivized creation of habits and social structures and exists as what he termed a practico-inert structure that has taken shape over time. This ‘milieu of action’, though it provides a structure for achieving personal goals, also works constrictively, by dictating the social framework within which goals ought to be pursued. As we could see in her analysis of women’s position in 1940s French society, Beauvoir had already come upon the idea that women’s experiences are strongly impacted by the social structures around them. Young borrows this concept of seriality and applies it to gender, thereby conceiving of a women series, which allows us to unite women in a non-essentialist category. This serializing is rather based on women’s relationship to their practico-inert environment, and the consequences of, for example heteronormative values, which condition women’s lived experiences. Young summarizes this concept by stating: “Thinking about gender as seriality disconnects gender from identity.”<sup>29</sup> This touches exactly on the central question I have preoccupied myself with throughout this thesis, as it has become clear that a stagnant notion of gender identity has a problematic influence on the way in which the feminist movement is able to organize itself. By analyzing the problematic elements of such a practico-inert structure, as

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Book 1: From Individual Praxis to the Practico-Inert’ in *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1960) 77-342.

<sup>29</sup> Young, ‘Gender as Seriality’, 734.

opposed to solely focusing on a subject's identity, we can more accurately understand the socio-political elements which ought to be challenged in order to promote emancipation.

As has become clear through the poststructuralist critique of identity politics or even intersectionality, when using identity categories such as gender, race, or class, as the basis for our analysis of injustice, one always imposes an essentialized, and therefore problematic idea of the subject's identity. Part of the power of conceptualizing women as a series, as opposed to a socio-political identity is that it allows for a flexible conception of such an identity, which isn't based on ontologically unsound assumptions grounded in biology or socially constructed narratives. Importantly, a series says more about a subject's position in society, and the constraints and expectations with which they may be faced, as opposed to making any claims about the subject's identity as such. Thus, it provides the opportunity to counteract the depoliticizing nature we identified in approaches such as identity politics, by allowing for an analysis of the broader socio-political forces which impact the experiences of subjects. At the same time, it furthers the intersectional undertaking of feminism, by providing an analysis of women's situation as encompassing all socio-political elements which impact their daily experiences. Importantly, it doesn't impose a fixed interpretation of a subject's position in society, as subjects constantly find themselves within different contexts and situations, thereby assuming changing positions within practico-inert structures. Their belonging to a series is therefore never statically fixed, but rather materializes as dynamic, ever-changing process. Herewith, it provides an improved version of intersectionality, which isn't limited to an analysis of the overlapping, static categories of identity that still provide a somewhat essentialized perspective.

### Practical application of Seriality

One way in which the practical relevance of conceptualizing women as a series, as opposed to a category, can be made apparent is through the analysis of cultural products, which not only reflect the values we uphold as a society, but can also impact our view of the world and alter our behavior. I will analyze 'The Assistant', a 2019 movie by director Kitty Green which offers a poignant, self-reflexive take on the #MeToo movement and the toxicity of today's movie industry culture. This will allow me to highlight the transformative potential of cultural products through new perspectives provided by a seriality-based analysis.

Set in pre-#MeToo times, it is clear, though never made explicit, that the story is inspired by the revelations of sexual misconduct regarding Harvey Weinstein and the movie

industry at large. We follow a day in the life of our main character, Jane, who recently started working as a junior assistant to a powerful executive in a New York-based film production company. We watch Jane leave her house long before dawn, arriving at the office before everyone else and wasting no time to tackle her long list of menial tasks. As the day progresses and we are introduced to a slew of other office dwellers, which range from executive bosses, their wives, casting actors, and other miscellaneous employees. Through a series of events and interactions, we the audience, along with Jane, gradually grow aware of shady practices that take place at the office. Frequent visits from beautiful women to the CEO, paired with his regular unexplained absences from the office are early hints to what goes on behind closed doors. When his wife calls, searching for him, Jane is told by her colleagues to inform her that he is in a screening, as it is a believable situation you can't get out of easily. After another, very awkward interaction in which Jane returns the lost earring she found in the CEO's office to yet another highly attractive woman, we can see that Jane starts to become uncomfortable with what is going on. About halfway through the movie, several coworkers enter the CEO's office for a meeting of some sort. They proceed to make jokes about how it is common knowledge to never sit on the office couch, a reference to the activities that probably take place there. As they wonder where the CEO is, one of the colleagues mentions that he is probably at the hotel where Jane just happened to drop off the new secretary, an underqualified, young and attractive girl. We see the realization in Jane's face as she understands exactly why the girl was put up at a nice hotel in the first place. Following this event, Jane decides to take matters in her own hands and goes to talk to her HR manager, trying to alert him of what she believes is going on in the office. She tells him about the incidents which have been taking place all day, alluding to the fact that the CEO is most likely taking advantage of these girls. The HR manager, however, very effectively downplays any concerns she has, and even manages to reframe the situation so that it appears that Jane is making everything up out of jealousy for the attention other girls receive. He is sure to make clear to Jane how many people he has waiting in line for her job, and how thankful she should be to even have this opportunity, essentially blackmailing her to stay silent on the matter. Right before she leaves his office, he even tells her: "I don't think you have anything to worry about, you're not his type", further confirming that he is fully aware of the CEO's practices yet stands by him. At the end of her day, a defeated Jane leaves the office at the same time as some other colleagues. One of the female colleagues assures Jane that she shouldn't worry too much about these women, as she tells her: "Don't worry, they will get more out of it than he will." We are shown that even other female workers are not a refuge for the



main character. Even they understand very well what takes place behind closed doors but also accept it as simply being a part of the way in which this industry functions.

‘The Assistant’ provides us with a piercing, yet nuanced account of the ways in which abusive office cultures are produced, legitimized and upheld by a range of actors, who all bare some responsibility whilst also being victims of the situation. If I were to interpret this movie by only focusing on identity, my analysis would obscure the fact that everyone in it is a subject with agency, in a unique position. It is thus not helpful to state that all the women in the movie are oppressed in exactly the same way, as this would be unproductive in understanding the unique circumstances faced by each subject. Jane, for example, is in a different position than the women who are being abused and needs a different set of tools to fight what might be considered the effects of the very same process of oppression. The women and even the men who might be complicit in laughing off and silencing Jane’s claims are victims in a sense, as they too are captivated by the narrative which normalizes these problematic behaviors. Applying a strict identity-based perspective to the movie therefore leaves us unable to identify the subtle ways in which undesirable values are internalized and reproduced by subjects. We are rather left with an analysis which simply labels the characters based on their supposed identity as a man or a woman, in which women almost always automatically are seen as the victims of sexual abuse and men as the perpetrators, without understanding the differences in the ways men and women can be victimized. This is an oversimplified and essentialized view of these subjects’ positions.

However, whereas such a shifting of the analysis overlaps with a more postmodern approach, here the uniqueness of the concept of Seriality comes into play. Taking on a postmodern perspective, we can only treat these as individual cases, therefore leaving us unable to draw broader conclusions about the systemic processes which allow these practices to take place. Yet we still ought to be able to speak of specific processes of oppression and how they interlink with identity and identity-formation, even if we shouldn’t aim to strictly define the victims and offenders of such a situation. We might otherwise be fooled into thinking that the women Jane talks to are themselves not also a victim of the system. For instance, when Jane’s coworker tells her not to worry about those women, as they will gain a lot from the experience, we see that she has internalized and normalized these processes. The way in which she frames the situation makes it appear to be no more than a business transaction in which the woman provides a favor to the CEO and gets a favor in return, in this case the promise of fame and success. One could say Kitty Green here shows us a glance of what Oksala warned us of, the

internalization of neoliberal values by subjects. Their actions are guided by the framework within which they find themselves, and in some sense, it is understandable for them to behave in this way. By watching the movie, we might very well be witness to another woman further internalizing systemic oppression. At the end of the film Jane, defeated by her failed attempt to report the abuse, simply goes home, and doesn't quit her job. We can imagine a future in which she is the one to talk to a coworker just like how she was talked to, convincing them it's simply a part of the job, and to forget about it. 'The Assistant' herewith illustrates an essential aspect of the issue, which is often obscured from our analysis. Even the women who seem to work to uphold these problematic values, are in some way victims of the flawed system in which they too have been absorbed.

Seriality allows us to look at the position of women in the movie, without essentializing them to only that one position but also understanding the way in which they, as a subject, are affected by the system and, as many of Jane's female coworkers seem to do: uphold it. By theorizing of the women in the movie as a series rather than a category, we are able to look at the systemic oppressive forces which affect them as a collective. At the same time, the flexible nature of the series allows us to recognize the individual positions of these women and even the variety of ways in which they experience and participate in this oppression. To reiterate Cornell's point, we ought to expose the discrepancies between what we conceive to be women's positions in situations such as these, or in other words our fantasies, and women's actual lived experiences. By creating, consuming and analyzing cultural content such as this movie, which are situated in between and show a spectrum of women in different positions, we can create space for nuanced, critical discussions around important societal topics such as those raised by the #MeToo movement. Much like we see in the analysis of the movie, Seriality provides us with a useful way of conceptualizing women within the broader discussion of women's empowerment. In this way we can speak of the empowerment of the series women, whilst leaving the space for women to be individuals and formally organize themselves in groups in whichever way they see fit.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to better understand the complex position of feminists today in an attempt to formulate a theoretical framework which encompasses the broad variety of aspects which complicate the task of women's emancipation.

Through an analysis of the role of identity politics and intersectionality within the movement, I was able to identify the important elements of analyzing the position of women in today's society. The movement has long grown out of its biologically deterministic phase and adopted a more broadly inclusive approach in which identity has taken the central stage and allowed for the development of useful perspectives on the question of emancipation. However, identity politics and intersectionality are extensions of a debate regarding the relationship between postmodernism and feminism which has been ongoing since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is nicely elucidated in *Feminist Contentions*. Using my theoretical exploration of this collection of essays, I have critically evaluated the relationship between identity politics and intersectionality within the context of feminism and identified the counter-productive elements of these approaches. On the one hand, strict identity-based thinking is prone to essentializing the position of women in society, whilst a poststructuralist deconstruction of identity runs the risk of producing an apolitical subject. Both these effects work to prevent the feminist movement from truly moving forward with its undertaking, as it either wrongly identifies the issues at hand, or leaves women powerless to organize themselves against the problematic hegemony. Furthermore, the feminist project grows to be increasingly complicated, due to the proliferation of neoliberal ideology in today's society, which claims to produce and emancipated subject, all the whilst further disguising processes of oppression. With a renewed focus on experience, emphasized by Johanna Oksala, I have identified that the feminist movement requires a theoretical framework which is able to simultaneously take into account the subject's individual subjectivity, as well as their position within the social collective.

I therefore put forward Sartre's concept of Serialité, through Young's useful feminist interpretation of his understanding of social collectives, as a promising alternative. By differentiating between a subject's passive belonging to series, as well as its ability to actively affiliate itself with groups, this theory treads the middle-ground position between postmodernism and critical theory, or identity politics and intersectionality, which has repeatedly been called for. Due to its flexible and dynamic nature, seriality theory allows for a perspective which embraces the benefits of the above-mentioned approaches, all the whilst largely avoiding their theoretical pitfalls, thereby fostering a more unified attitude within the

movement and increasing its transformative potential. Though I have presented a strongly theoretical interpretation of the position of the subject within feminism today, it is my contention that the perspective I have put forward carries practical implications with it. Through my analysis of the movie 'The Assistant' I have shown the advantages of this Seriality-based approach.

As Cornell had put forward in her essay, the transformative power of emancipatory movements such as feminism lies in the space which exists between fantasy and lived experience. This is due to the fact that, by definition this space remains undefined, thereby leaving our conception of female experience largely undefined. It exists somewhere within the relationship between fantasy and lived experience, in which either one has an influence on the other, providing an ever-contestable view of gender identity. This implies that change can be fostered by actively challenging some of the notions and preconceptions, which we ought to resignify, through everyday behaviors, and our approaches to politics, culture and interpersonal relationships. With the rise of the #MeToo movement, a space was opened up between the fantasy and lived experience of the role of women in the movie industry. Through this space, we were able to critically assess the implications of such practices, and openly express our disapproval of them. Cultural products such as 'The Assistant' can therefore serve as vehicles for reflection regarding such societal issues, thereby enabling the creation of space for contestation. However, in order for these cultural products to function progressively, we ought to analyze them through the use of Seriality, in order to avoid theoretical pitfalls of other approaches. The theoretical framework I have outlined above therefore not only says something about the fantasies we often hold to be true but can also guide our everyday practices and thereby subjects' lived experiences.

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