



BDSM and the boundaries of criticism: Feminism and neoliberalism in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O*

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Abstract

In 2011, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, an erotic novel by British author E.L. James, took the publishing world by storm. This article examines the lack of a feminist backlash to the book by comparing it to *The Story of O* (1954) and the backlash that that book engendered. In addition to parsing the terms of the existentialism that underlies *The Story of O*, this article unpacks the neoliberal logic of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Keywords

BDSM, feminism, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, neoliberalism, *The Story of O*

In 2011, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, an erotic online story by E.L. James (the pseudonym for British author Erika Leonard) took the publishing world by storm. In rapid succession, the story was turned into a trilogy and released as a set of e-books and in paperback, first as a book on demand, and then a film. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was hailed as a cultural event.¹ The trilogy tells the story of Anastasia Steele, a college student, and Christian Grey, a wealthy entrepreneur whom she interviews. Christian does not want a conventional relationship; he wants Anastasia to be his submissive. In the contract that Christian provides, this would mean his controlling every aspect of her life, including how and when she eats, exercises, and sleeps, and asking her to be submissive during the elaborate sexual scenes that he plans. In these scenarios, she might be bound, spanked, or penetrated with assorted objects. That *Fifty Shades of Grey* foregrounds BDSM (bondage and discipline and sadomasochism), a subculture in which partners often use erotic role playing and props to act out scenes that highlight power imbalances, has the novel touted as a

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seismic cultural shift. This is particularly so as the books were often described as 'mommy-porn', erotica for married women and mothers (Schuster, 2012). As Alex Dymock notes, its stature within this economy of coupled intimacy, femininity, and domesticity has been staggering (2013). Jen Doll, a cultural journalist, wrote that the book 'is functioning as a tool for female bonding, an aphrodisiac to women who might not otherwise be all that interested in sex with their husbands, a marriage revitalizer, a glimpse into the joys of reading for children who've never seen their parents doing it so much, and an educational supplement about BDSM' (2012: n.p.). When framed as a phenomenon that grew out of the desires of contemporary women, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was praised for 'liberating' female sexuality.

Though one might ask whether the book frees women to speak more explicitly about their own sexual urges and/or allows them to explore them more openly, the association between the book and the liberation of female sexuality was firmly established. Amber Martin links the popularity of the books to an increase in the consumption of sex toys (2013), and journalism and blogs proclaiming a surge in interest in BDSM have since appeared. First-person narratives about experiences with BDSM proliferated, tips for novices became standard supermarket fare, and marketers seized on the opportunity to link their product to the cultural phenomenon. Yet *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not the first bestseller to deal with BDSM. *The Story of O*, published in France in 1954 (translated into English in 1965) also caused an immediate stir.² Written by Pauline Réage, a pseudonym for Dominique Aury, *The Story of O* won the *Prix de Deux Magots* for emerging voices in literature. In the novel, O is deposited at Roissy, a castle where she is stripped, penetrated orally, anally, and vaginally, and taught how to submit. After her initiation, the narrative ricochets between BDSM tableaux in which O follows her lovers' dictates and describing O at work. O is given to another lover, goes away for further training, and is pierced and branded as a sign of her bondage. Though the French government wanted to ban the book because they felt it was obscene, the immediate controversy surrounding *The Story of O* had to do with questions of female agency. Could submission be a feminine desire? What was the relationship between sexual submission and patriarchy? Fifty years later, the questions being asked of *Fifty Shades of Grey* differ markedly. Most critics focus on the book's prose but few allude to subtexts beyond sexual liberation. Members of the BDSM community have distanced their sexual practices from the portrayals of BDSM in the book because the scenes do not involve established sets of rules and the issue of consent is made murky (Flox, 2012). Others argue that Anastasia's lack of agency and Christian's domineering behaviour set dangerous precedents as models of healthy relationships and explorations of sexuality (Flood, 2012). For the most part, however, issues of gender and agency have been pushed to the side, replaced by a sense of relief that an avenue for female sexual expression has been opened up. As one blogger phrases it, 'I didn't like the book myself, but if you liked it, and it turned your engine, more power to you. Go on with your happy reading self. Since women's sexuality and reproductive health are under political

attack here in the US [...] anything that supports a woman's right to satisfy her own sexual curiosity is all good with me' (SB Sarah, 2012: n.p.). While *The Story of O* provoked questions about agency, authorship, and gender, the responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey* have focused on what constitutes intimacy and normalcy; concerns about gender and agency have been moved to the periphery. In this article, I unpack the shifts in these responses as a way to think about BDSM's symbolic role in these narratives of submission, gender, and intimacy.

Gender, agency, and *The Story of O*: Fiction as feminist critique

The most immediate controversy surrounding *The Story of O* was the identity of its author. At issue was whether or not a woman could have written this text. Could women write such erotica or was this the work of a man? In his introduction to the text, the publisher Jean Paulhan pleads ignorance, but argues that the text suggests that the author, whoever Réage might really be, is actually a woman.³ As evidence, he points to the attention to visual detail in the text: 'the green satin dresses, wasp-waist corsets, and skirts rolled up a number of turns (like hair rolled up in a curler)' (Paulhan, 1965: xxv). He also points to the narrator's persistent selflessness: 'when René abandons O to still further torments, she still manages to have enough presence of mind to notice that her lover's slippers are frayed, and notes that she will have to buy him another pair'. For Paulhan, this is 'something a man would have never thought of, or at least would never have dared express' (1965: xxv). The ambiguity surrounding the author's identity allows us to examine the relationship between gender, submission, and sexuality. Questions concerning Réage's identity matter because they reify the association between sexual agency and masculinity. One of the issues at stake is the scripting of female sexuality as agential. While the narrator's submissive posture does not challenge gender norms that assume a naturalised feminine submission, Réage's act of authorship does. Though Paulhan was aware of Réage's true identity because she was his lover, he writes the preface as though he is unaware. There he expresses certainty that Réage is a woman, but notes that O's story could have been written by a man because she is a male fantasy: 'rare is the man who has not dreamed of possessing Justine' (Paulhan, 1965: xxv). Though pleased with the text, he cannot quite reconcile its narrative of submission as expressing actual feminine desires: 'so far as I know, no woman has ever dreamed of *being* Justine' (1965: xxv; emphasis in original). In order to square both the desire for submission and the courage, which he imagines it would take to write about that desire, with femininity, Paulhan resorts to placing Réage in a masculine genealogy: 'Woman you may be, but descended from a knight or crusader' (1965: xxv). Réage's narration of O's desires to submit catered to masculine fantasies, but produced confusion about Réage's gender identity because of the explicitness of O's sexual desire.

By placing *The Story of O* alongside the Marquis de Sade's work via the invocation of *Justine* (1791), the Marquis de Sade's novel that features the continued

rape and torture of the titular heroine as she moves through different situations, the question of female sexuality and agency coexists alongside understandings of the relationship between the erotic and the philosophical. Sade was admired by existentialists for his authenticity, which was signalled by his interest in radical freedom (Barthes, 1997; Beauvoir, 1966; Klossowski, 1991). The Surrealists took up Sade as a political emblem in the 1920s, but Sade gained popularity in the 1960s when idealisations of the eighteenth century as a time before industrialisation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie were particularly seductive (Steintrager, 2005). For prevailing leftist thought, Sade represented liberation on both sexual and social fronts. Steintrager writes, 'Instead of being evil, Sade becomes a sort of role model for our own potential liberation [...] Sade was socially repressed *because* of his radical claim to sexual liberation' (2005: 359; emphasis in original). Additionally, an interest in Sade's position as a libertine also opened the door for popular interest in kink: 'in many more popular renderings of Sade, resistance and revolution drift into a celebration of new sexual freedom in the guise of a frolicsome "kinkiness"' (Steintrager, 2005: 361). *The Story of O*, then, in the 1960s, was read as a story of transcendence. While my introduction to *The Story of O* foregrounds its existential concerns, it is because I want to illuminate the ways that the novel has been read as making an argument about agency and transcendence rather than about BDSM. Though BDSM scenes form the bedrock of the story (we rarely hear of eroticism outside of them), it is not a story *about* BDSM. *The Story of O* locates the culture of BDSM in spaces that are removed from the everyday spaces that the characters or readers inhabit. The castle at Roissy, for example, is fictional and does not reference a reality outside of the text (though BDSM cultures certainly existed in France during this time). In this way it invites the readers to focus more on the relationship between the characters and to dwell on what BDSM represents in the relationships portrayed. BDSM offers a frame for a particular set of questions, but the novel activates questions of agency and subjectivity at a level beyond O's individual circumstances. Most pressingly, I argue that the novel allows us to think about gender and agency. Once gendered analyses gained traction inside and outside of the academy in the 1960s and 1970s, the novel divided people: there were those who read it as a symptom of patriarchal oppression and considered O a victim, and those who regarded the novel as critiquing patriarchy by illuminating its dangers.

Andrea Dworkin takes issue with *The Story of O* for linking femininity with submission, arguing that it reifies the idea that women are victims and reduces female agency to the realm of the sexual, where women are also powerless. Dworkin describes *The Story of O* as a fairy tale where 'a figure of innocence and evil enters the adult world' and 'emerges defined by the hole between her legs' (1974: 53). For her, the novel is not merely making pornographic claims, but epistemological ones in that it attempts to define what a woman is using the frame of sadomasochism: 'It links man and woman in an erotic dance of some magnitude: the sado-masochistic complexion of O is not trivial – it is formulated as a cosmic principle which articulates, absolutely, the feminine' (Dworkin, 1974: 53).

Dworkin frames her critique as part of a larger conversion narrative involving feminism. Initially, she writes that she was drawn to the novel because it was a story about questions of subjectivity and agency. Of this reading, Dworkin writes:

I experienced O with the same infantile abandon as the *Newsweek* reviewer who wrote: 'What lifts this fascinating book above mere perversity is its movement toward the transcendence of the self through a gift of the self. . . to give the body, to allow it to be ravaged, exploited, and totally possessed can be an act of consequence, if it is done with love for the sake of love'. (1974: 54)

Her conclusions regarding O as an emblem of femininity come after she embeds the book within a structural analysis. We can read this shift as a product of 1970s feminism (broadly speaking) and Dworkin writes that '[a]ny clear headed appraisal of O will show the situation, O's condition, her behavior, and most importantly her attitude toward her oppressor [demonstrate] the psychology of submission and self-hatred found in all oppressed peoples' (1974: 53). Dworkin's comments introduced the novel to a feminist audience interested in critiquing it because of the association with BDSM. In a moment when some feminists argued that focusing on sexuality was harmful and that pornography and promiscuity degraded women by reducing them to the status of sexual objects, feminists who were invested in seeking liberation through sexuality were accused of being blind to its pernicious aspects. The arguments against BDSM were the product of a set of overlapping assumptions: that the task of feminism was to end violence against women, that BDSM was about violence, and that equality should be the bedrock of sexuality.

Because BDSM was seen as emulating patriarchal, masculine forms of domination through the eroticisation of power, some feminists, Dworkin included, perceived it as reinscribing the notion of women as passive victims. Choosing submission was a sign of false consciousness, a sign that one was under the thrall of patriarchy. Sadomasochistic acts were lumped with rape and domestic abuse as a form of violence against women (for example, see the Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism in 1983).⁴ In characterising BDSM as a symptom of structural violence against women, some argued that it imposed a norm of patriarchal domination. Seen in this light, *The Story of O's* fascination with the gaze and subject-object relations become a meditation on structures that prevent women from obtaining power. O's desire to become an object and annihilate herself can be read as a symptom of patriarchy and the power of the male gaze. *The Story of O* can be read as a literal description of men's power over women. Returning to Dworkin, we can see how attention to the structures that surround O can lead one to argue that *The Story of O* offers a story of 'psychic cannibalism, demonic possession, a story which posits men and women as being at opposite poles of the universe – the survival of one dependent on the absolute destruction of the other. It asks, like many stories, who is the most powerful, and it answers: men are, literally over women's dead bodies' (1974: 63). There is, however, a way of reading *The Story of O* as illuminating the problems of

patriarchy by bringing attention to the paucity of choices that O has as a woman. As a story centred on submission from a feminine perspective, it adds texture to what submission entails by giving O a limited amount of agency. Ultimately what the text reveals, I argue, is the ambiguity of femininity in the modern era and the difficulties that arise from that constraint.

We get a sense of this ambiguity almost immediately because we know that it is O's agency that orchestrates what we witness, but also because she is explicitly situated within the larger structure of patriarchy in that she is a fashion photographer. Susan Griffin argues that this locates O as 'an extraordinary woman, a woman who transcends the traditional social roles for women' (1982: 190). Indeed, this is an arresting profession with which to endow a female character in France in the 1950s. Her status as a professional marks her as separate from the rhetoric of French post-war femininity. O's career enables her independence, in that she lives alone and seems to be financially solvent, and allows her to play with the gaze and its properties of domination. We see this when O encounters a model who becomes her and René's lover:

O was looking at Jacqueline and could feel René's eyes following her gaze. Jacqueline was wearing a ski outfit, the kind that only movie stars who never go skiing wear [...] O said to herself that no one could resist the desire to drink of that green and moving water beneath the silvery lashes, to rip off her sweater to lay his hands on the fairly small breasts. (Réage, 1965: 95)

In O's rhapsody of Jacqueline's appeal, she occupies a masculine observational position, describing not her desire to touch Jacqueline, but her understanding of Jacqueline as desirable to men. When O says that no one could resist Jacqueline, she is thinking not of herself, but of men, specifically René. The duality of O's subject position – embodying both masculinity (as René) and femininity (as herself) – complicates our ability to imagine O as transparently replicating the male gaze.

This helps us to reread O's objectification. While Griffin describes *The Story of O* as a story of self-annihilation, where O 'must learn that she does not exist. She becomes only an image to herself', we can also imagine this emphasis on surface and superficiality as a way to think about the aesthetic work that goes into submission (1982: 188–189). O self-consciously participates in this economy of aesthetics from the moment that she begins her journey to Roissy. This culminates in her examination of herself in a mirror before one of her sessions with the men. She gazes approvingly at her own submissive posture:

When she was properly made up and prepared – her eyelids penciled lightly; her lips bright red; the tip and halo of her breasts highlighted with pink; the edges of her nether lips roughed; her armpits and pubis generously perfumed, and perfume also applied to the furrow between her thighs, the furrow beneath her breasts, and to the hollow of her hands – she was led into a room where a three-sided mirror, and another mirror behind, enabled her to examine herself closely. (Réage, 1965: 7)

I suggest that we view O's role in her own transformation as a Foucauldian technology of the self. Michel Foucault describes technologies of the self as practices 'which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (1988: 18). Make-up, perfume, and clothing allow O to become closer to her ideal submissive posture. While her goal is self-annihilation, it is her agency that enables this process. Indeed, agency is central to technologies of the self, but we should be mindful to remember that constraint is also at work. Technologies of the self are but one strand in determining action. While O is shown to embrace and enact her transformation into submission, her relationship to the male gaze also calls attention to the ways in which technologies of the self interact with other technologies, namely those of normative femininity. O exhibits agency within constraint. *The Story of O*, then, can be read as a narrative that foregrounds the complicated nature of structures such as patriarchy and agency and positions complicity as the path most taken.

Further, this ambiguity is important because *The Story of O* should also be understood as a love story. O submits so that she can receive love and in doing so, we recognise her very gendered precarity. In her reading of *The Story of O*, Jessica Benjamin (1988) highlights the importance of recognition for O. As a woman, it is not something that she can produce on her own, but Benjamin argues that her submission to Sir Stephen provides O with recognition as a subject. Benjamin is invested in the narrative of O's love. Her reading of objectification, however, hinges on the notion that those without power seek recognition. O wants to be an object so that she is recognised as having been a subject. Benjamin argues that 'once we understand submission to be the *desire* of the dominated as well as their helpless fate, we may hope to answer the central question, how is domination anchored in the hearts of those who submit to it?' (1988: 52; emphasis in original). The more O submits, the more recognition she gains. For Benjamin, '[w]hat we shall see, especially in voluntary submission to erotic domination, is a paradox in which the individual tries to achieve freedom through slavery, release through submission to control' (1988: 52). *The Story of O*, then, is a fantasy about submitting to an Other 'who is powerful enough to bestow his recognition as she gains it, though vicariously' (Benjamin, 1988: 56). This obsession with recognition leads to a fascination with objectivity and offers another perspective on masochism as a performance of the self. Submission, from Benjamin's perspective, is O's only recourse for agency under a system in which she has no actual power. Through submission, which she links to love, she gains recognition, which provides her with access to power. One of the central lessons that we take away from this narrative is that this recognition and love that O seeks is not based on mutuality. It is not her journey *with* Sir Stephen to different psychic space, but her move towards recognition in a way that (again) highlights the paucity of choices available to women and underscores the impossibility of mutuality under these circumstances.

***Fifty Shades of Grey*, mommy-porn, and neoliberalism**

Fifty Shades of Grey appears to bear a great deal of similarity with *The Story of O* in that a woman is introduced to BDSM through her heterosexual partner. However, structurally they are very different. In contrast to O, who asks René to embed her within Roissy so that she can learn about submission, Christian pursues Anastasia aggressively because he cannot control his desire for her and he believes she will be a good submissive. Though she consents to all of their sexual activity, the novel sets this against her sexual inexperience (she is a virgin when she meets Christian and professes to have had no previous interest in sex) to suggest that she is unclear what she is consenting to except for her own desire for Christian. Further, Christian's behaviour towards her is likened to that of a 'stalker' and his sexual proclivities are framed as a response to his troubled childhood (James, 2011: 62, 68, 82, 295, 296, 299, 418, 459). Though Anastasia is willing to try BDSM for him (and she receives some pleasure during these acts), her ultimate goal is 'more', which is to say a conventional relationship with Christian that involves what the couple term 'hearts and flowers' and that we can understand as a move away from BDSM (James, 2011: 72, 110, 230, 244). The novel, then, offers a moderate exploration of BDSM while adhering to a conventional romantic plot – both Anastasia and Christian take turns being Cinderella, transforming themselves to better suit their partner's needs and eventually making the partnership permanent through matrimony. Like Angelika Tsaros (2013), I argue that *Fifty Shades of Grey* consolidates heterosexual privilege and whiteness whereas *The Story of O* invests in the radical space of self-annihilation. If *The Story of O* narrates one woman's particular journey (remembering that either ending leaves O alone), *Fifty Shades of Grey* is about the process of becoming a monogamous couple.

Like *The Story of O*, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been subject to debates about whether its portrayal of BDSM opens doors for an open exploration of female sexuality or whether the portrayal of a female submissive is pernicious. Lisa Downing provides an overview of the sex-positive and sex-negative sides of the debate before coming down as sex critical, arguing that the 'biggest objection to the sex-positive agenda lies in its simplistic belief that by proliferating more and varied forms of sexual representation, expression, practices, and orgasms, a "positive" and progressive – indeed feminist – agenda is inevitably being served' (2013: 95). Following Downing's scepticism towards either discourses of liberation or discourses of shaming, I ask how *Fifty Shades of Grey* provides insight into neoliberalism and its relationship to gender and agency. While E.L. James is a pseudonym for Erika Leonard, public forums are not filled with debates about James or her gender. Rather, they settle into one particular narrative: James is a married mother of two teenage boys who lives in a suburb of London. In a story for *Time* magazine, Belinda Luscombe writes,

In her other life, she is Erika Leonard, a Nutella-loving wife and mother of teen boys, who worked in the nonglamorous end of TV production, organizing contracts and

clearances. To escape, she used to read a lot of romance novels – she still has about 700 of them in her attic. While her books are racy, Leonard is rather shy and prudish. (2012: 52)

Again and again, James is described as a woman in a happy marriage who decided to try her hand at writing as a form of escapism from the drudgery of daily life. This emphasis on James' non-writing life works to undermine her credibility as an author. In this way, James' history as a reader of romance novels bleeds into her production of the trilogy, so that she is at once its producer and consumer. This closed circuit emphasises the production of readerly pleasure through titillation and negates other content within the novel.

This flattening of the possibilities of reception to the stimulation of female desire is a hallmark of the emerging 'mommy-porn' genre. When characterised as mommy-porn, the books speak to several positions: they shore up the status of the couple as the locus of intimacy (both for the readers of the books and for the main characters) and they produce sexuality as something that can be domesticated and bundled into a consumer product (as is evidenced by the marketing power of linking any product to the novel and the fact that the novel is being sold as a marital aid). Dymock argues that '[s]exual identity, according to the *Fifty Shades* model, is not constructed through the act of disclosure, but instead produced through social fantasy; a social fantasy that does not promote collective emancipation, but individual entitlement to commodities' (2013: 892). These commercial tentacles and literal domestication of sexuality (by calling it mommy-porn) allow us to see some of the major differences between the critical reception of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O*. Given the fifty years between the books, there are many ways to explain the differences. We could argue that critics have largely ignored the book because of the writing style. We could argue that the underpinnings of feminism have shifted so that patriarchy is not a term that currently circulates with much critical purchase. Further, we could say that the aftermath of 1980s feminist debates on BDSM has swung towards sex-positivity, so critiques of BDSM are no longer circulating with as much force. Alongside this, we could argue that BDSM has entered mainstream consciousness. These explanations point to several shifting cultural forces, but what unites them is the neoliberal move away from thinking about the structural towards the privileging of the individual and personal responsibility. In this vein, the problems in Anastasia and Christian's relationship are viewed as particular to them and not the outgrowth of other structural issues.

This personalisation produces a problem in that it diminishes the possibilities of critique even as it provides a window into the way that neoliberalism is working. As the focus on individual rights (and responsibilities) grows, the attention to structure has been reduced. This produces a culture of individuals in which it is more difficult to see problems as a matter of scale and structure rather than issues of an individualised, specific register. This means that critics of *Fifty Shades of Grey* often fail to articulate its larger structural resonances. We see this most specifically when we turn to BDSM, which has been hyped as the controversial core of the book.

However, the current climate of imagined sexual liberation, and the shifting tides of feminism make it clear that it does not occupy the book's centre. Part of the book's mythology stems from the (misogynistic) idea that it is introducing women to a subculture that was previously unknown to them. As evidence, we are told that attendance at BDSM clubs has skyrocketed and sales of sex toys have hit the roof (Haber, 2013). Indeed, the book describes BDSM scenes so that they are replete with eroticism. While this feeds into a structure that honours individual choices and increases recognition of who counts as a sexual citizen, it ignores the morality that underlies the book's portrayal of BDSM. It is clear that Christian's participation in BDSM is motivated not purely by pleasure, but by pathology (it is his attempt to assert control after an abusive childhood). His choice has been constrained, not by recognisable structures such as capitalism or sexism, but by his individual psychology. He exists as a character to be saved from his darkest predilections and returned to the world of non-BDSM sex.

This focus on sex and BDSM also obscures the novel's gendered power dynamics, which critics describe as perniciously gender normative and which undermine the queer ethics of kink. In the book, masculinity inheres in Christian's sexual and business prowess, which he uses to dominate Anastasia, whose vulnerability is heightened by her sexual inexperience, youth, unemployment, and femininity. This conflates gendered violence with BDSM and scripts kink as reifying traditional gender norms of female passivity. This heteronormativisation of kink enacts 'a certain form of normative violence that is performed in the story to practices and identities that are constructed as outside the normal' (Harrison and Holm, 2013: 558). Additionally, the novel's blurring of the boundaries between kink and abuse has led advocates against domestic violence to argue that the book eroticises sexual abuse and normalises gendered violence (Flood, 2012). In an interview Clare Phillipson, director of a charity for victims of domestic violence says, 'It really is about a domestic violence perpetrator, taking someone who is less powerful, inexperienced, not entirely confident about the area of life she is being led into, and then spinning her a yarn. [...] It's the whole mythology that women want to be hurt' (Flood, 2012: n.p.). Within the novel this inequality threads its way into many aspects of Christian and Anastasia's lives and works to structure their relationship in ways that the book both takes up and ignores. Though the BDSM scenes indicate a mixture of pleasure and pain, there are scenes from their relationship which register as abuse in that Anastasia does not fully understand what she has consented to and the experiences leave her deeply unhappy. Here, I part ways with Angelika Tsaros, who argues that Anastasia's attempts to transform Christian's desire are emblematic of her negotiations of consent (2013: 868). Further, there are several times when Anastasia unexpectedly encounters Christian because he has followed her. He also presents her with a BlackBerry and laptop so that she is under his surveillance. These moments signal a problematic dimension of the relationship. I focus here on the fact that these questions of gender and agency are obscured by the attention to the frank portrayal of sexuality and the prospect of expanding BDSM into a new market.

Just as I argued that we could read *The Story of O* as highlighting the structural constraints of femininity, here I argue that we read *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an illustration of the way that neoliberalism cloaks questions of gender and agency. Anastasia's dilemma about whether or not to succumb to Christian's charms and embrace submission is framed not as a question about the possibilities of recognition or her lack of choice as a woman, but as a personal quest to enter into a monogamous, heterosexual relationship with Christian. She entertains BDSM because it interests him. There are fleeting suggestions that she might enjoy it, but they are framed against conversations in which she worries about whether this is the right thing to do. During one telling sexual encounter of the first volume, Anastasia narrates her excitement, worry, and thoughts of Christian:

Closing my eyes, I try to calm myself down, to connect with my inner sub. She's there somewhere, hiding behind my inner goddess. Anticipation runs bubbling like soda through my veins. [...] This is so... I want to think *wrong*, but somehow it's not. It's right for Christian. It's what he wants – and after the last few days...after all he's done, I have to man up and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs. (James, 2011: 484; emphasis in original)

Here, we see that she is motivated by Christian's desires even as we see a hint of her own enjoyment. This 'bubbling of anticipation' cannot act as a substitute for agency, however, and given that we see Anastasia constantly attempting to negotiate the terms of her relationship to include less bondage and domination, her discomfort with the practice is clear. Though the book wants us to imagine this as feminism, it is not clear what purpose these tantrums serve. Sometimes she acts against the voice in her head and sometimes with; this furthers the idea that she does not know what she wants. Additionally, by inserting this layer of individuation between Anastasia's thoughts and actions, her choices are scripted as occurring on the individual level rather than as the result of any structural inequalities.

The neoliberal I/we

While Anastasia and Christian's relationship is scripted to seem unique, it is actually representative of a particular narrative of love and intimacy. Even as I argued that *The Story of O* functions as a love story, the love in *Fifty Shades* has to do with shoring up normative models of intimacy and monogamy. Anastasia's assertion of her personality might seem like a more progressive stance than O's explicit desire to disappear, but Anastasia's assertions of self are generally used in the service of uncovering more information about Christian or attempting to convince him to try the type of intimacy that she prefers. It is not self in the service of an *I*, but rather the extension of self for a *we*. And, Anastasia has a particular version of the *we* in mind, a version in which each person is vulnerable to each other, but not to anyone else. It imagines mutuality while being blind to the structural obstacles in its path. We see this fetishisation of the *we* from the beginning of the novel. Though

Anastasia is framed as someone without previous interest in men or sex, she is immediately attracted to Christian. At their first meeting, she shakes his hand and feels 'an odd exhilarating shiver run through [her]' (James, 2011: 21). This discourse of uniqueness pervades the story. Given her sexual inexperience, it is not surprising that Anastasia consistently remarks that she 'never felt this way before' about most elements of her interactions with Christian. However, James also provides Christian with a discourse of 'firsts': his first encounter with 'vanilla' sex, the first time that he shares his room with a woman, the first time he introduces a woman to his family, the first time he contemplates a relationship outside the boundaries of BDSM (2011: 132, 439). By combining Christian's pathology and Anastasia's individuation, the book goes to great lengths for us to understand the relationship as novel and the characters' investment in each other as mutual and deep. He wants to possess her ('Be mine'), but this works with her own deep desire for him.

This 'uniqueness' also goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of boundedness that characterises the neoliberal couple. If they have never shared these emotions with others, they also do not share them with people outside of the relationship. In the case of Anastasia this is by explicit decree (she signs a non-disclosure agreement), while Christian's lack of connectedness is symptomatic of his abusive childhood. While the circumstances of this particular couple may be extreme, the idea that intimacy is something that is forged exclusively between members of a monogamous couple permeates contemporary culture and is notably absent in *The Story of O*. While O loves Sir Stephen, a large part of their relationship is the sharing of intimacy with others. As David Eng makes clear, the bedrock of neoliberalism is not only the individual, but the individual's right to privacy (2010). Eng argues that the colour-blindness of neoliberalism and the connection between property and whiteness have made intimacy the valued currency of our time, shrinking the public sphere and enlarging the private one. Eng writes:

[I]n a colorblind age, the intimate sphere increasingly becomes a crucial site for a reconsideration and reevaluation of racial conflict organizing not just the private domain but the public sphere as well. The current evisceration of a political and public language to address social inequality across both realms reveals only one part of a historical process that Lauren Berlant identifies as the incredible 'shrinking public sphere,' a process solidified by the neoconservative Reagan-Thatcher revolution of the 1980s. (2010: 6)

Anastasia and Christian's narrative of singular devotion and exclusivity speaks to this cultural current. Their love is for and about them, it is assumed to be separate from their own embeddedness within a social world, working to mask their whiteness and privilege. While the discourse of privacy removes suffering from the sight of the state (making it individual responsibility), it also serves to redistribute affective bonds so that intimacy between the couple rather than between communities or other groups is prized. Further, as Brenda Cossman points out, the sign of the good

neoliberal sexual citizen is the person in a committed monogamous relationship, a person who puts effort into the relationship. She argues that '[g]ood citizens are those who make their relationship a project, who recognize the personal and social costs of infidelity and divorce, who in the face of the transformation of intimacy undertake the responsible and hard work of making their relationship work by working on their relationship' (Cossman, 2007: 107). Anastasia and Christian's constant negotiations over the terms of their contract are emblematic of this neoliberal commitment to marital work. Equally important is the neoliberal emphasis on emotional intimacy, which Eng attributes to the enlarged private sphere and Cossman describes as central to modern relationships and modern sexuality: 'Sexual intimacy is then all about emotional intimacy – about attaining an even higher level of emotional intimacy within a relationship' (Cossman, 2010: 80). The trilogy's trend towards non-kinky heterosexual intimacy and emotional disclosures on Christian's part further confirms this bias. This elevation of the mutual (and exclusive) removes anything social (the space where we might locate critique) from the text's purview. *Fifty Shades of Grey* shrinks the world until it is only Anastasia and Christian, and their exchanges of secrets, emotions, and orgasms. This is obviously a world very different to the world of surfaces and objectification that *The Story of O* depicts. The retreat into the individual produces a critique on a different register. This is why criticism of the books has been restricted to taking issue with Anastasia's passivity or Christian's aggressiveness or the structure of their relation. While these things are problematic, at their root is the elevation of the couple.

It is within the structure of the private couple that the superficiality of Anastasia's agency becomes legible. If *The Story of O* illuminates the problematic elements of structure as it impinges on the possibilities for individuality, *Fifty Shades of Grey* illuminates what happens when a discourse of individuality is allowed to run free, unmoored from understandings of structure. In place of a possible meditation on subjectivity, we see a capitulation to neoliberalism's privileging of the individual and the emphasis on the couple as the site of intimacy and social control – it is through coupledness that both Anastasia and Christian are redeemed as sexual citizens. Worse, as a diagnostic of our contemporary social moment, we are also left without the tools to attach a critique of the text to anything more specific than neoliberalism. The book itself also circulates within these circuits of neoliberalism and individuality such that it reinforces the idea that one can purchase (via the book or the accompanying offshoots) sexual liberation and emotional intimacy. In very different ways both *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O* offer meditations on the possibility of agency and subjectivity. It is not mere coincidence that these novels both draw on BDSM. The fact that BDSM occasions the actions that take place highlights its function as a way to diagnose powerlessness in these novels. While we do not actually hear about the intricacies of BDSM in *The Story of O*, O's use of BDSM as a way to learn about submission tell us a great deal about how power works. O wants access to power, but the structures of patriarchy mean that submission is her route towards it. Likewise, Anastasia's participation in BDSM is framed not as a move towards exploring her sexuality

but as a way to foster greater intimacy with Christian and to stabilise their status as a couple, which camouflages her own lack of agency. BDSM's function as a foil for these other narratives about power and structure says a great deal about the relationship between sexuality, subjectivity, and agency at these particular historical moments. It also tells us very little about the wide variety of ways that one might participate in BDSM, different types of BDSM, or the ways that BDSM itself might play with agency, sexuality, and subjectivity. When the focus of our response dwells on whether or not this expression of sexuality is good or bad, it obscures the ways in which agency and subjectivity are intertwined with sexual expression. In focusing on relations of power, these novels illuminate the complex ways in which subjectivity and agency are bound up in structures beyond the individual.

Notes

1. The trilogy's success was noted by articles in business sections of newspapers, such as the *New York Times* (Bosman, 2012) and in academic journals. *Sexualities* published a special issue on the phenomenon in 2013 (Deller et al., 2013).
2. The *New York Times* obituary for Aury notes that 'French censors forbade any publicity for the novel when it appeared in 1954 under the pseudonym Pauline Réage [...] But the book sold millions of copies and in 1955 it won the Deux-Magots prize, an important French literary award' ('Dominique Aury, 90; Wrote "Story of O"', *New York Times*, 3 May 1998 [<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/03/world/dominique-aury-90-wrote-story-of-o.html>]).
3. Réage was revealed in 1994 to be Dominique Aury née Anne Desclos. Dominique Aury was a well-known translator and Paulhan's lover. She said that she wrote the book as a love letter to Paulhan (St. Jorre, 1994: 42).
4. See Gayle Rubin (1981) and Pat Califia (1980) for comments on prejudice surrounding S&M.

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