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Sexualities 2013 16: 880

DOI: 10.1177/1363460713508884

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Flogging sexual transgression: Interrogating the costs of the ‘*Fifty Shades* effect’

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Abstract

This article offers a critical reading of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon by situating the novels as works of transgressive erotic fiction that stimulate circuits of female consumption and the production of sexual identity as commodity. It submits a novel contribution to current scholarship on the mechanisms of sexual transgression by acknowledging its neutral or even reactive qualities, and by laying bare its relationship with disciplinary regimes of social power. It demonstrates that, rather than a politically progressive utopian strategy that might delimit the parameters of sexual desire, transgression now primarily functions as a mechanism through which capitalism is reinforced and the institutions of heteronormativity maintained.

Keywords

Commodity, consumption, sexuality, transgression, women

Introduction: Uncovering the transgressive function of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon

This article constitutes an examination of the strategies deployed in marketing and publicizing EL James’s *Fifty Shades* brand and invites the reader to situate the trilogy within a broader canon of erotic – and purportedly transgressive – literature. While the idea of taking *Fifty Shades* seriously as a work of literature has hitherto been ridiculed on the grounds of its many trappings of ‘bonkbuster cliché’ (O’Hagan, 2012) alongside near-universal denouncement of its ‘terrible writing’ (e.g. Crace, 2012; Massie, 2012), the article considers the phenomenon surrounding the novels an important and timely site for critical inquiry, and the texts themselves

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as a springboard for a range of media discourses and commercial enterprises that scrutinize and reinforce the limits of female sexual desire. As an interdisciplinary legal scholar concerned principally with the ways in which sexuality is limited and at the same time produced by the law, the most value to be eked from the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon was found by viewing it as a 'symptom' (Downing, 2013: 93) of representations of the erotic in popular culture, and by extracting from its commercial appeal a transgressive effect on the means by which sexuality becomes a locus for consumption.

Transgression here, however, is not automatically privileged as a 'utopian political strategy' (Glick, 2000: 20) as has sometimes previously been its construction in sexualities scholarship. Indeed, transgression-as-liberation has been one of the predominant media narratives in response to the trilogy. As Tim Dean argues, the 'blandly predictable' use of transgression as critical discourse stems from 'the loss of transgression's conceptual specificity' (Dean, 2011: 66). Such texts often unquestioningly offer up the celebratory reading of transgression associated primarily with Georges Bataille, whose influence on contemporary sexualities scholarship, particularly queer studies, merits more attention than can be adequately afforded it here.¹ But to consider transgression synonymous with the violation of sexual taboo, as Bataille does, and as queer has a tendency to do, fails to take into account transgression's equal permeation as a reactive (rather than resistant) force *against* social transformation, which some queer scholars imagine will automatically follow the deregulation of sexuality and the breakdown of sexual limits.

Instead, for the purposes of this essay, transgression is understood as an inert form of sexual licence, an empty carnival of imagined excess whose aim is to create 'exemplary consumers of commodities' (Hester, 2013). Stallybrass and White, reading transgression in relation to Bakhtin's theory of carnival, argue that it is a deliberate and controlled mechanism under which we are permitted to experience an exhilarating if short-lived sense of freedom while hierarchies of social power are ultimately preserved and unmoved (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 201). Further, Foucault suggests that the relationship between transgression and taboo is more complex than 'black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces' (Foucault, 1977: 35). Instead, transgression for Foucault simply announces limitation and its obverse, an 'affirmation [that] contains nothing positive' (1977: 36), and which heralds the 'inner experience' as free of disciplinary or moral restraint from social – even legal – spheres.

It is this 'inner experience' of sexual freedom that the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon appeals to, and which permits its reading as a work of transgressive literature. As Downing attests, what the *Fifty Shades* novels promise is something relatively taboo (BDSM practices and power exchange) concealed within a conservative form – the popular romance narrative – (Downing, 2013: 96), an apparatus of sexual licence made commercially successful predominantly on the basis that it maintains familiar and 'safe' hierarchies of social power. The reader is invited, then, to partake in a transgressive transaction: the 'inner experience'

of freedom – quite literally personified as Anastasia Steele’s infamous ‘inner goddess’ in the novels – located in previously off-limits sexual fantasy may be accessed so long as the product through which it is admitted, far from disrupting modes of disciplinary power, reinforces them.

The *Fifty Shades* phenomenon has raised questions, occasionally alarm, in innumerable media outlets about the ways in which sexuality is *consumed*, most particularly by women (see Deller and Smith, this issue). This article reluctantly offers reassurance that while an increased consumption of erotic commodities previously associated with sexual subcultures may seemingly demonstrate the ‘liberation’ of non-normative sexual acts, the means by which they are marketed and sold demonstrate only that such acts have been reimagined as ‘safe’ and ‘sane’ components of the institution of heterosexuality. Perhaps counter-intuitively the novels themselves reveal the link between female sexuality and consumption rather effectively, as I hope to reveal.

The article focuses on three questions media narratives have continually asked about *Fifty Shades* and the consumption of the erotic, and explores their possible answers in greater detail than has been previously permitted in the context of academic scholarship. Firstly, the piece asks whether we should begin to envisage literature which mobilizes the mechanism of sexual transgression outlined earlier as nothing more than an additional commodity alongside other sexual consumer goods, marketing a particular model of sexuality to women. Secondly, it questions whether the easy marketability of *Fifty Shades* as a commodity and its dizzying commercial success is premised on the mechanism of transgression I have described. Lastly, it argues that sexual transgression itself is always limited by and predicated on its very marketability.

***Fifty Shades* as ‘chick-whip’: Between the romance novel and postfeminist chick-lit**

Much of the marketing strategy promoting the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has been structured around the previously successful mass marketing of chick-lit. While it may be for the scenes of erotic power exchange that the series has become best known, EL James has claimed that the extraordinary success of the novels is not primarily due to a prurient interest in its graphic depictions of sadomasochistic sexuality, but because it ‘tells a simple love story’ (Singh, 2012) which achieves a broad appeal for women readers.

The plot of *Fifty Shades* does indeed chiefly conform to the narrative of the classic romance novel (Downing, 2013: 93), insofar as its central heterosexual relationship follows the traditional pattern of a courtship between a sexually naïve young woman graduate, Anastasia Steele, and the older, sexually experienced, self-made billionaire CEO, Christian Grey. The trilogy culminates in their marriage and Anastasia’s pregnancy. This representation of sexuality conforms to a popular reading of mainstream heterosexual BDSM as ‘kinky’, sexy and titillating rather than a pathological or juridical interpretation of BDSM as disgusting, criminal and

risky (Cowan, 2012; Khan, 2009; Wilkinson, 2009). While the incidents of sado-masochistic sexual congress momentarily seem to superficially disrupt the order of things by offering a detour through 'kinky fuckery' as a means by which the couple achieve both sexual and social intimacy, the trilogy concludes by resuming the romance narrative's supposedly reassuring heteropatriarchal function.

This particular combination of 'kinky' sex and unchallenged heteropatriarchal gender politics has led to some resistance in recognizing the trilogy as a cheerful addition to the chick-lit canon. As Gill and Herdieckerhoff write, chick-lit attempts – though in their view often fails – to rewrite romantic narratives in accordance with the realities of social transformation in women's lives and changing constructions of gender and heterosexual relationships, which the traditional romance novel stubbornly refuses to acknowledge (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006: 494). While the 'emotionally satisfying happy ending' (2006: 490) common to chick-lit may maintain a convention of the romance novel, the genre was most successfully marketed to women 'who feel that they're too savvy to be duped by the traditional romance narrative' (Whelehan, 2005: 186).

Instead, *Fifty Shades* is situated as 'post-chick-lit'. The *Daily Mail* went so far as to suggest that the 'chick-lit era may be over', reporting a slump in sales by a tenth owing to the arrival of its replacement, 'mummy porn', as the new 'must-read genre for women' (Thomas, 2012). Far from advocating an edgier alternative to chick-lit, 'mummy porn' is a disparaging yet cruelly accurate description of the trilogy's mainstream appeal; a stage upon which the supposed drudgery of professional and domestic life for women is momentarily suspended through the act of buying into a mildly titillating yet even more conventional alternative.

Katie Roiphe's controversial article in *Newsweek* attempts to make sense of the popularity of *Fifty Shades* by suggesting that now, more than at any time in the past, women are eagerly consuming fantasies of heterosexual submission to unburden themselves of the agentic power newly attributed to them. In this sense, the sado-masochistic content of *Fifty Shades* could be interpreted as merely displaying 'everyday cultures of power' (McClintock, 2004: 89). As Downing remarks, Roiphe's thesis seems to be that the significance of this forgotten longing 'to surrender to an unreconstructed man' (Downing, 2013: 93) is that it comes 'at a moment when male dominance is shakier than it has ever been' (Roiphe, 2012). Roiphe concludes that this is no coincidence.

Hanna Rosin's equally controversial book, *The End of Men*, attests that women are close to surpassing men as breadwinners, outperforming men in education and still often singlehandedly raising families. Writing in defence of her book's central argument for the *Guardian*, Rosin's chosen extract attempts to demonstrate that women's rise comes at the expense of men's decline, and that the economic recession has made men its primary 'victims' (Rosin, 2012) as a result of the marketplace adapting itself to inherently 'feminine' qualities that exclude them. In an unstable economy which by necessity must accommodate social change (perhaps even the 'see-saw marriages' Rosin offers as case studies in which men and women divide economic and domestic responsibilities differently at different stages of their

relationships), Roiphe opines that *Fifty Shades* offers a reassuring certainty in its casting of gender roles. The plucky heroine of chick-lit looking to 'have it all' is out. The 'stylised theatre of female powerlessness' (Roiphe, 2012) is in.

Nevertheless, amongst the plethora of ambivalent media responses to the novels, the term 'chick-whip' has been coined as an alternative name for an emerging sub-genre of women's fiction in recognition of the series and the trend for representations of BDSM its commercial success has stimulated.² While accepted by Roiphe and others as a symptom of its social and cultural moment, the arrival of 'chick-whip' seems to have occasioned other journalists to feel ill at ease. Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Sarah O'Leary asks 'When did chick-lit get so hardcore?... [C]hick-lit land has always offered modern women a pragmatic way to indulge in "less progressive" sexual fantasies, without renouncing their feminist principles', presumably through their 'emotionally satisfying happy endings' (Gill and Herdiekerhoff, 2006: 490). But she complains the scenes of sexual violence contained in the novels 'will make it harder for women to look their sexy bosses in the eye' (O'Leary, 2012).

Stanley opines in the *New York Times* that the lesson *Fifty Shades* seems to be teaching the publishing industry is:

[N]owadays the best step forwards is to take a step back... this sort of riches-and-rescue tale isn't easy to find outside Harlequin novels... a glimpse of stocking can still be shocking when it's used to bind a lady's wrists; it's irresistible when a handsome billionaire is tying the knot. (Stanley, 2012)

Stanley's suggestion is that in an era in which the market for easily accessible sexual material is glutted, sex must be transgressive to cause a stir; but the novel's transgressiveness is not to be found in its scenes of spanking or its written contracts negotiating power exchange. Rather, she suggests, in contrast to the sexually experienced heroines of chick-lit, *Fifty Shades* offers the precise opposite, catering to unfashionable fantasies of sexual naivety, control and possession. 'Particularly now when having it all means doing it yourself, there is a special allure to the daydream of someone else taking control' (Stanley, 2012), even if it comes at the expense of losing tenets of hard-won gender equality. The transgressive mechanism at play here, then, is precisely the reactive, conservative gesture I recounted earlier. It is social transformation that the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is positioned as a reaction to, and it is this reaction through which the 'inner freedom' attributed to the reader flouting gender transformation in flights of submissive fantasy is constituted.

But while responses to the book have at times condemned its backward-looking gender politics (O'Leary, 2012; Stanley, 2012; Williams, 2012), others have found cause to praise its capacity to inspire sexual fantasy in women who might previously have been reluctant to read any erotic fiction, for permitting a greater number of sexual possibilities as a result of the books' visibility, for allowing women to seek out their 'inner goddesses', and for raising the subject of female sexuality in

popular culture as a legitimate topic for wider public discussion and debate. Downing reminds us that in response to the increasing visibility of sexuality in popular culture, this polarization of 'sex negative' vs. 'sex positive' discourses is well-trodden territory in the history of feminist thought. By instead scrutinising the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon through a sex critical lens, she submits, we might take up the opportunity to unveil the normative ideologies *all* forms of sexuality are capable of perpetuating, and holding them to account (Downing, 2013: 95).

However, many of the problems associated with this polarization of responses are the result of the urgency with which critical responses have insistently tied the novels to a literary subgenre, presumably because its categorization allows marketing strategies to build on a growing brand, which may elicit greater sales. Thus, the question remains; if the depiction of sexuality in *Fifty Shades* is too 'hardcore' for the straightforward romance novel, and its characters and plot too saccharine for sassy chick-lit, are there any other literary canons in which *Fifty Shades* might be more accurately situated, and what might that tell us about the kind of fantasy the trilogy is flogging?

***Fifty Shades* as a transgressive literature of 'nonpositive affirmation'**

As the introduction to this article proffers, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is perhaps most interestingly read when broadly conceived as an addition to – and condition of – a Western canon of transgressive literature. But, I will argue, the trilogy can be conceived as such not only because of its graphic sexual content, but also the means by which it has been read. In an article that invites us to rethink the privileging of sexuality as a focus for authority-defying, radical political gestures through a reading of Charlotte Roche's novel, *Wetlands*, Helen Hester astutely notes that 'contemporary Western culture has channelled its quest for the pleasures of transgression into this area more than any other' (Hester, 2013). Her understanding of the means by which sexuality has become this focus is, like mine, reliant on the Foucaultian 'repression hypothesis' (Foucault, 1979: 10).

In short, Foucault's theory of sexual repression convinces us that if one considers sexuality 'repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression' (Foucault, 1979: 7). It is perhaps a phenomenon particular to women that the mere fact of their sexualities being made visible is greeted, to quote Brooke Magnanti, 'with wonderment and disbelief, like a unicorn emerging from the forest of feminine chastity' (Magnanti, 2012a). That female sexuality, and seemingly perverse sexuality at that, has been afforded so many column inches in 2012 as a result of the success of *Fifty Shades* has been held up as cause for celebration.

The unprecedented popularity of the novels stems in part from their original publication as e-books. Previously, erotic novels were for private consumption, to be kept on the bed stand, probably rarely even displayed on one's bookshelves. One of the reported pleasures found in reading the trilogy emerged from its furtive

consumption on new mobile technologies, in particular the kindle, which allows the reader to hide the books and, indeed, themselves under 'a cloak of erotic invisibility' (Lyons, 2012). The 'inner experience' of transgression consumed through this particular means of reading 'chick-whip' could hardly be more clearly demonstrated. But as Downing remarks, the idea that sexuality can be 'freed up' to liberate the subject buys wholly into Foucault's repression hypothesis, and has the side effect of reifying sexuality itself as authoritative (Downing, 2013: 95).

However, Foucault's work on transgression also recognizes that as a philosophical concept it is neutral and recursive rather than symbolic of a victory over previously fixed limits. Rather, he says, it:

contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time...[T]ransgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight, without that serpentine 'no' that bites into fruits and lodges their contradictions at their core. (Foucault, 1977: 35–37)

By undertaking a reading of Blanchot's principle of 'contestation', Foucault shows us that 'nonpositive affirmation' is a gesture which 'proceed[s] until one reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit and where limit defines being. There, at the transgressed limit, the "yes" of contestation reverberates, leaving without echo the hee-haw of Nietzsche's braying ass' (Foucault, 1977: 36). This particular formulation of the transgression mechanism implies that literary works which hold transgression as key to their appeal shape an experience that has 'the power to implicate (and to question) everything without possible respite' and to indicate the 'immediacy of being' (Bataille, 1943: 62). The 'immediacy of being' is also restricted to the interior of being which, free from the constraints imposed by the social, can relentlessly question, aggravate and unsettle all things certain.

What *Fifty Shades* offers the reader, then, is an experience of this 'immediacy' that harks back to the vision of transgression found in the work of Bataille. The subject is confronted with the possibility of limitlessness, of passing from a rational, ordered realm to an irrational and chaotic one. Bataille's most famous work of fiction, *The Story of the Eye* (1982 [1928]), attempts to outline how the literary text can be an exemplary model for exploring the limits of the modern subject (in particular the sexual subject), and it is from this canon that *Fifty Shades* extracts its possible credentials as a transgressive text.

While the acts depicted in *Fifty Shades* are a far cry from the sexual extremities that might meet with Bataille's approval, the reported pleasure sought out in reading the trilogy undertakes precisely the course of an excavation of the modern sexual subject, which perhaps explains the wide appeal of the books. The 'interior experience' of discovering a realm of sexual fantasy never previously sought out, perhaps therefore conceived as the result of an inhibition, may be understood as the breaking of a limit. The frequent appearance of Anastasia's 'inner goddess', dancing 'the merengue with some salsa moves' (James, 2012: 98) in celebration of the expression

of her previously unbidden sexuality, is positioned as a signifier of her unlimited though often 'forbidden' desire. The books recall a classic Freudian division of the subject, positioning the relentless *id* of desire, the 'inner goddess', against the nagging superego, which might be attributed to the voice James refers to as Anastasia's 'subconscious'. The commitment of this 'subconscious' to some loosely defined principles of feminism – or at the very least female agency – are situated by James as the limit her 'inner goddess' must transgress and overthrow to experience the unlimited throes of passion that sex with Christian Grey seems to offer.

One reason EL James's readers frequently cite the novels as 'page turners' is because they are insatiably curious about how far Christian Grey will push Anastasia, physically and psychologically. Will he violate her limits? What might the transgression of sexual limits lead to? What further unknown sexual depravities might the reader be exposed to? If the reader is chasing a Bataillean experience of ever-intensifying sexual depravity, however, they are likely to be sorely disappointed.

Ultimately, Anastasia's inexplicable ability to 'tame' Christian Grey's sexual preferences is played out through the conventions of heterosexuality, specifically the trappings of the romance novel's 'emotionally satisfying happy ending': marriage and reproduction. His perversion, explained in the novels as a pathological adult symptom of child sexual abuse, is miraculously cured. *Fifty Shades'* avowed transgressive literary function is precisely the 'nonpositive affirmation' that Foucault consigns to its centre. Limits, rather than operating as sexual taboos or thresholds that are broken through, are offered to the readers as affirmation of the scope of their own sexual parameters. By upholding marriage and reproduction as institutions under which perversion may be 'tamed', the novels demonstrate that these parameters of sexuality can be safely contained and limited if perverse sexual acts are performed within them.

What the popularity of the novels also gestures towards is that the particular mechanism of transgression in operation in *Fifty Shades* has permitted its easy advertisement to female consumers. The final sections of this essay are given over to an analysis of the means by which sexual transgression functions in relation to consumption, and how transgression, when positioned as a *transaction*, far from heralding a break with sexual taboos of the past, instead reveals its utility as a powerful form of cultural capital. The popularity of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy testifies to the power of the commodification of sexuality to co-opt 'alternative' sexual practices into heteronormativity, accommodated through their commercialization.

Transgression as transaction: Reading the *Fifty Shades* 'sex boom'

The biggest 'cost' of the '*Fifty Shades* effect' is its literal cost to the consumer. The commercial appeal of the novels, however, does not yield many new insights into the ways in which women consume sex. Rather, it underscores patterns of appropriation of feminist discourse in product placement familiar to late capitalism, particularly familiar in the selling of sexual commodities, and in using sex to sell to women.

There is no shortage of literature that unearths the relationship between the co-option of key elements of feminist discourse into semiotic markers that act as cultural capital in pursuit of new customers (for example, Gill, 2007, 2008; Goldman, 1992; Lazar, 2009; Macdonald, 1995; McRobbie, 2007; Shugart et al., 2001).

But what the *Fifty Shades* effect most clearly demonstrates is that the private 'inner freedom' offered in the experience of reading erotic fiction can be equally subject to commodification. In an article recounting the relationship between erotic fiction and postfeminism, Esther Sonnet also looks to Foucault's repression hypothesis by way of explanation. In the economic circuit of commodities in which *Fifty Shades* is located, the claim to know the 'truth' of sex for women can be converted into hard capitalist cash from those seeking to know' (Sonnet, 1999: 177). Mass market-targeted erotica is the most pervasive manifestation of a more generalized logic of desire-driven consumer culture. Erotic fiction is no longer merely a subcultural genre of literature, but is situated within a range of contemporary feminine products and practices of purchase. As Evans writes, the 'pursuit of the commodified self is the pursuit of the sexual self; individual, private, innermost, accomplished through the acquisition and conspicuous manifestations of style' (Evans, 1993: 45). By imploring women to seek out and satisfy their 'inner goddesses', the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon very effectively capitalizes on this imagined pursuit of sexual liberty.

While these acts of purchase are certainly not exclusive to *Fifty Shades*, it is worth examining why it is these particular novels and emerging brand that have proven the most successful sexual commodity for women to date, even eliciting what has been called a 'sex boom' in the marketing and consumption of sexuality. As Feona Attwood wrote in 2005, women's consumption of sexual commodities has been recognized in a rapidly expanding marketplace in high street shops as well as online. This has led to the integration of sexual commodities into a social process in which sex is becoming "de-sexualized" in order to construct an address to women' (Attwood, 2005: 405). Sexuality is positioned somewhere between the acceptable and the forbidden, which requires a formulation of femininity that 'relies quite explicitly on masquerade, on trying on the clothes of an adult female sexuality which remains disembodied, not-yet-imagined or experienced' (2005: 402). Further, sexuality in *Fifty Shades* operates within the clutches of disciplinary power, merely a signifier of a much broader tendency in popular culture and media to reinscribe female sexuality with the markers of self-governance. *Fifty Shades* merely perpetuates the notion that the limits of sexuality women's erotic narratives represent may be carefully extended, so long as these limits are streamlined with the mainstreaming and commodification of 'alternative' sexual identities more generally.

BDSM has increasingly been touted by women's magazines (Beckmann, 2001) and in high street shops (Storr, 2003; Weiss, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009) as a set of practices through which women might experiment with sex. But the normalization of BDSM has inevitably been accompanied by its commercialization and commodification. The message this new exposure to BDSM in popular media and consumer outlets delivers is that these practices are accessible only through the act of

purchase. The sex toy industry has previously seen a spike in sales of individual commodities when they are given appropriately 'feminized' product placement in mainstream popular culture, most notably Vibratex's Pearl Rabbit vibrator after it was shown and celebrated in *Sex and the City*. The difference with *Fifty Shades*, David Sax writes in *Businessweek*, is that the novels specifically name an entire catalogue of products and have stimulated the production of a whole host of others to capitalize on the novels' successful brand name. Objects used in particular scenes of the novels, such as a tickle and whip (a riding crop with a feather on one end), blindfolds, handcuffs, satin wrist restraints, nipple clamps and 'Ben Wa' balls (beads worn by Anastasia in the novel to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles) have seen an increase in sales by as much as 400% in the last quarter following the books' publication (Sax, 2012).

Aside from the ever-increasing availability of novels, memoirs and how-to books that emulate and capitalize on the success of the trilogy, in October 2012, after striking licensing deals with EL James, the *Fifty Shades* brand has been 'officially' connected to a broader range of feminine products, endorsed by James herself. Three manufacturers have been brought on board to establish a range of clothing – from T-shirts to 'loungewear'. The novels' title has also been lent to a board game, CD and – perhaps inevitably – an 'official' line of *Fifty Shades*-branded sex toys. With items named after passages from the books, the set is clearly branded with words from the series and decorated almost exclusively in black and – appropriately – tasteful shades of grey. While Brooke Magnanti is right to point out that the range of toys is at least 'not emblazoned with the image of a sodding pink cupcake' (Magnanti, 2012b), the products seem to particularly endorse the purchase of 'preludes to sexual intimacy' (Steele, 1996: 118) through dressing up and the use of accessories rather than sexual intimacy itself: a recourse to precisely the masquerade of femininity Attwood describes. What is also made clear from the particular means by which the *Fifty Shades* brand has been expanded and marketed is that the 'nonpositive affirmation' Foucault names as fundamental to the mechanisms of transgression is key to its commercial success. It is this function of transgression as essential to the process of the commodification of sexuality that I will inspect in greater detail in this article's final section.

'Reveal the goddess in you': Cultures of postfeminism and the selling of sexual transgression

As Foucault predicted in his repression hypothesis, the mechanisms of transgression have been skilfully and pervasively incorporated into the commodification of sex, and at no time more successfully than in the marketing and selling of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon. While the relinquishing of one's 'inner goddess' to the experience of sexual discovery may be a function, as Bataille proposed, of reading any sexually transgressive literary text, the association of transgression with political progressiveness where sex is concerned is 'showing signs of wearing down and losing its hold over the contemporary imagination' (Hester, 2013). The hyper-

visibility of sex in contemporary culture and advertising realizes Foucault's hypothesis all too clearly. Furthermore, the transgressive tactics that publishers readily identified in James's novels have produced the effect Foucault calls an 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1979: 17), in which the mere visibility of the books and its supposed transgressive effects on female sexuality produces circuits of cultural criticism, production and consumption that generate value, meaning and interest in a project while the idea that transgression may function as a key marketing tactic in its promotion remains obscured.

The polarization of opinion Downing recounts the novels stimulating in debates about female sexuality in popular media is symptomatic of a manoeuvre Mark Fisher names 'capitalist realism', in which an ideological position becomes increasingly difficult to mount as a result of the 'pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture' (Fisher, 2009: 9). Rather than streamlining energies of resistance against this culture, the incorporation of the spirit of rebellion into consumer outlets placates those energies and successfully divides and individualizes them. While a modish desire for rebellion is almost always deployed in the marketing of sexual commodities, the integration of the signifiers of BDSM as alternative sexual subculture into these circuits of consumption reduces any subversive elements of its practices or ethics to no more than 'stylings' fully assimilated into mainstream culture. It is this particular strategy that has proven devastatingly effective in the production and marketing of sexual commodities associated with the *Fifty Shades* novels – and, in fact, the sale of the novels themselves.

While the use of sex as a means of selling consumer products is as old as advertising itself, previously, feminists were reliant on the objectification of women as an effect of the male gaze to mount a critique. As Gill indicates, a shift in the language of advertising from situating women as passive sexual objects to women as sexually agentic is itself a product of 'viewer scepticism', but also results from the impact of feminism on women's lifestyles and attitudes (Gill, 2008: 39). As women become increasingly financially independent, advertisers have swiftly recognized that elements of popular feminism, particularly discourses of empowerment, may be effectively repackaged as 'commodity feminism' (Goldman, 1992), neutralizing the force of feminism's socio-political critique. The language of sexual transgression has been key to this shift in a move Jameson calls 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past' (Jameson, 1991: 18). The possibility of self-transformation is marketed to women as the foundation upon which this process of empowerment takes place, and nowhere is this more effective than in the marketing of sexuality.

That Anastasia Steele is sexually passive and submissive is both crucial to the trilogy's success, and emblematic of a compensatory exchange process whereby people are offered a series of gratifications in exchange for their passivity. In *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, Anastasia's 'inner goddess' is awoken not by Christian Grey's sexual transgressions, but primarily by the lure of consumerism. In a scene in which Christian insists upon buying Anastasia a new car, while her subconscious is 'cringing in disgust, mortified by

the whole 'buying-a-car process', her 'inner goddess' tackles her to the ground. *Convertible? Drool!* (James, 2012: 205). As Zoe Williams noted in an article for the *Guardian*, Anastasia's sexual identity is 'elided with her consumer choices', her sexual appetites 'play[ing] understudy to her consumer appetites' (Williams, 2012). Her subjugation, then, is not induced by the sexual prowess of her lover, but the fact that she becomes enthralled with his spending power. There is even an implicit echo to be found in the disclosure of the desires of Anastasia's 'inner goddess' with the marketing strategies used famously to promote Gillette shaving products for women. The campaign's tagline, 'Reveal the goddess in you', seems emblematic of the ways in which female narcissism is reinscribed as liberation, and the political motivations of feminism are 'collapsed into distinctly personal and private desires' (Douglas, 1994: 248). Anastasia's 'inner goddess', particularly in the latter two novels, perfectly represents this shift from feminism to post-feminism, in which women's entitlement to the fulfillment of individual desires is now privileged above collective political struggle.

The revelation that the transgressive 'inner experience' of reading *Fifty Shades* promises is therefore unlikely to be unearthed in the pleasures of breaking sexual taboo or even in the act of speaking female sexual desire, but through the guilty pleasures of shopping. What's more, shopping is not even positioned by James as symptomatic of Anastasia's discovery of selfhood and choice, but is imposed upon her as a 'gift' from Christian betokening his unparalleled adoration. As Williams attests, readers of the novels are less seduced by their sexually pornographic content than by the pornography of consumerism rewarded to Anastasia in exchange for her sexual complicity: 'diamond bracelets, jet skis, hosiery, purest silks, smart day-to-night dresses, Power Macs and 19-bedroomed houses with glass walls' (Williams, 2012). Indeed, even the covers of the novels betray their content; what we see is not the typical trappings of the romance novel – bare-chested hunks, rapturous embrace – nor even obviously erotic signifiers, but anonymous objects: a tie, a mask, and a key. The constant references to recognizable consumer goods and brand names in the novels veil its debt to the romance novel by appealing to the idea that this is a postmodern love story set in a cosmopolitan US city, and that the heroine is emblematic of the modern every-woman. Caught in paralysis between her sensible 'subconscious', who warns Anastasia against turning her back on her desires and career goals, and her 'inner goddess', who persuasively gestures towards the pleasures of being a kept woman, it is repeatedly the 'inner goddess' who wins out.

What is perhaps most interesting about this power play between the 'subconscious' and the 'inner goddess' is what it tells us about the transgressive functions of capitalism. Anastasia's 'inner goddess' does not delimit sexual taboo, nor does she indicate a move towards sexual autonomy or self-determination. Rather, she acts as metaphor for what Lazar refers to as an 'entitled femininity... a subject effect of the discourse of postfeminism which claims leisure and pleasure as women's entitlement, along with the celebration of all things feminine and "girly"' (Lazar, 2009: 374). This entitlement may be read not as the accumulation of socio-political liberty, but the 'nonpositive affirmation' that the limits placed on sexuality are

precisely where they should be, and that a woman's place is best dictated by the ease of her access to these entitlements.

Conclusion

It was Sigmund Freud who first, with some exasperation, posed the question, 'what does woman want?'.³ As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, the question of women's sexual desires has been appropriated and answered for through the mechanisms of capitalism and consumerism, establishing a link between the governance of femininity and private affirmation of sexual limits. What woman wants, according to the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, is to uncover and disclose new limits of sexuality and femininity in an infinite process that, rather than liberating the self from the apparatus of social power, instead imposes new limits that must be transgressed. Moreover, this act of transgression cannot be a straightforward positive move from one limit to the next, but must be 'non-positive': neutral, repetitive, or sometimes reactive. The neutrality of sexual transgression's operation is clearly demonstrated in the emphasis of positive responses to the novels, citing their importance in bringing female sexuality to light. But this new visibility is only applauded if it serves to reinforce the polarization of feminist discourses that inhibit social progress. Sexual 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.

It is perhaps emblematic of the 'non-positive' mechanism of transgression at play in the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon that in addition to mobilizing a 'boom' in the sale of sex, media sources have anticipated a boom in childbirths and pregnancy as a result of the novels' – and presumably their accompanying erotic consumer goods' – success. 'Mummy porn' has quite literally fulfilled its most conservative function. It is not a fantasy of transgressing the limits of femininity and female sexual desire that has been revealed to be its most persuasive selling point, but that it recovers the heteronormative narrative thought to be universal to women's lives, and sells it as a subversion of feminism. Marriage and reproduction, whatever kinds of non-normative sexual acts are used to delay or distract us from them, are reassuringly reiterated as being central to women's social lives. In this sense, *Fifty Shades* is the perfect sexual commodity, putting feminist and queer stylings on display while simultaneously bolstering disciplinary regimes of social power that naturalize and reproduce the transgressive mechanisms of capitalism.

Notes

1. While the influence of Bataille's notion of transgression on contemporary sexualities scholarship has not yet been merited a full-length monograph, see Downing and Gillett (2011) 'Bataille at the avant-garde of queer theory: transgression, perversion and death drive', for an illuminating excavation of the limited queer potential of three of Bataille's key themes and concepts.

2. Hot on the heels of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, Sylvia Day's bestselling *Crossfire* series, Vina Jackson's *Eight Days* trilogy, Sophie Morgan's *Diary of a Submissive* and Nichi Hodgson's *Bound to You* were speedily published in 2012, seeking to capitalize on the 'chick-whip' moment and replicate the commercial success of EL James's novels.
3. It is reported by Ernest Jones that Freud made this remark in conversation with Marie Bonaparte in his biography, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (Jones, 1955: 468).

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