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Sexting girls: technological sovereignty and the digital

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This essay explores the contemporary fact of girls sexting. Instead of theoretically granting girls a form of technological sovereignty while sexting as sexual empowerment, it pauses to take a selfie of the *adult* subjects – parents, educators, and sex-positive feminists and queers – attached to this form of agency for girls. If sexuality remains an alluring reparative trap by offering, through a reverse discourse sustained by the plasticity of girlish whiteness, a way of transforming girls as objects into subjects, this essay problematizes that gesture as a racially normative one, reading it further alongside the relation of technology to sexual difference. To speculate on how the scenography of sexting could be seen differently by adults, this essay suspends the search for authentic meaning and knowledge, following an intuition that we cannot presently see anything behind the image of the sext. After examining how criminal law breaks the tension in the definition of “the girl” between vulnerability and agency by extending objectification through child-pornography law, the essay takes a speculative turn with feminist readings of the question of modern technology to consider the analytic and pedagogical purchase of the non-sovereignty of the girl who sexts.

Keywords: sexting; girlhood; digital; pornography

A man is not a thing. It is true that we speak of a young girl who is faced with a task that is too difficult for her as being a young thing, still too young for it, but only because we feel that being human is in a certain way missing here and think that instead we have to do here with the factor that constitutes the thingly character of things. (Martin Heidegger, “The Thing”)

Considered in herself, the Young-Girl expresses nothing; she’s a symbol the meaning of which is elsewhere. (Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*)

Introduction: a selfie

The traffic in sexual images of girls hardly began with the advent of SMS picture messages. However, the coining of the term “sexting” (sex + texting) to refer to the trade in sexual

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images sent by mobile-phone users in recent years has reframed cultural anxieties over the economy of representation of the sexual girl. Whereas in the older discourse of child pornography the ideological facticity of the image could stand in for proof of the girl's victimization, her innocence, and suffering at the hands of the child pornographer, the age of the "selfie" has had the effect of making girls into child pornographers of themselves. In this contradiction generated by the performativity of the law, sexting girls are subject to provisions in the U.S. child-pornography statute that make them into pedophiles. The law forces itself into declaring that girls "use" and "incite" themselves to produce child pornography, turning sexting into self-inflicted child abuse. Even before the image is sent to someone else, threatening to go viral, the law decides that the girl must point the camera at herself, like a predator (Calvert 2009; Waster 2010). After several years during which prosecutors employed statutes created before smartphones and Web 2.0 to imprison children as child pornographers, even registering some as sex offenders, outrage from children's advocates has led to a reformist impulse that emphasizes individual accountability. Now fractured, the law alternates between threatening to punish girls who sext with jail time and rehabilitative re-education. In *Miller v. Skumanick* (2009), the core case study of this essay, the court is able to resolve these two approaches only by seizing and then returning the objectified sexuality of girls to their parents for a lesson in propriety.

While the constitutive paradoxes of what Ellis Hanson (2006) describes in his eponymous essay as "the child as pornographer" have been subject to feminist and queer critique, sexting *girls* deserve more consideration in light of these legal and cultural developments.¹ For "girls" also stage a problem constitutive of modern American culture: the meaning of plasticity in relation to vulnerability and agency. As Catherine Driscoll (2008, 15, emphasis added) argues, reviewing the history of girlhood and girlhood studies, "the modern girl emerg[ed] as an index of the problem of the present," so that "the girl, girl culture and analysis of girl culture" are all bound up in "a discourse on modern life," where the accelerations of modernity are cast as both threats to girls' innocence and opportunities for their self-determination.

In contemporary digital culture the contradiction has only amplified. As Heather Warren-Crow (2014) explains, the digital *is* girlish. The plasticity of the digital image, its elastic, metamorphic, and transmedial qualities, are all formal properties assigned to girls since at least the late nineteenth century (19). Because of their ascribed value of plasticity, girls can be read both as the passive victims of digital technologies that manipulate them and as agents of media innovation. Plasticity, as Warren-Crow notes, indexes both a receptivity to form and an active force of self-assembly (2). As sexting emerges as another issue of girls caught between vulnerability and agency, it does so in a moment where digital culture in general has become synonymous with girlish form.

Yet despite the centrality of images to this unfolding problem, the import of *girls* sexting is not straightforwardly representational: the issue is not limited to how girls are represented differently under the law or in cultural narratives from boys who sext. Sexting girls, both as sexual girls² and as users of digital technology, also catalyze an anxiety about the general sovereignty of the digital subject and the future of feminism in an era of neoliberal consumerism, for it remains difficult, beyond the language of law, psychology, and sex panic, to know what girls are doing when they sext, let alone what it might mean, to them or to adults. For that reason, some sexting scholarship has undertaken a demystifying and reparative

reading that argues that girls make their own sexual or gendered meanings in excess of the legal and cultural strictures that cast them as at worst child pornographers, or at minimum irresponsible. The hegemonic narrative of girls sexting has been critiqued for its heteronormative politics of sexual respectability, its blaming of girls for the endemic violence of masculinity, and its participation in a misogynist discourse on the “hypersexualization” of girlhood (see, for example, Renold and Ringrose 2013; Albury and Crawford 2012; and Karaian 2014).

The challenge with this critical and reparative reading is that sex-positive or feminist meanings do not necessarily depart from the assumptions that otherwise represent girls as passive victims. Sarah Projansky (2007, 69, emphasis in original) adds, in this vein, that “rather than ‘taking sides’ feminist media criticism might point out that the collective representation of girls in popular culture repetitively, even obsessively, *asks* us to take sides.” When sides *are* taken, Amy Adele Hasinoff (2014, 103) points out, agency has often been located for girls by reinterpreting sexting in the *exact* opposite sense of sex-negative accounts, with scholars “respond[ing] to the charge that girls are passive by arguing instead that they are agents” (112). Some ethnographic work in girlhood studies has, in turn, invited girls to explain how its economy of representation works. Given the opportunity, these girls narrate a social world far more complex than the cultural narratives attached to them, replete with gendered and racialized power differentials (see Ringrose et al. 2013). Nevertheless, what visions of sovereignty do these analyses rely upon? If “girls” name a plastic problematization of the relationship between vulnerability and agency, a relationship that has been historically sexualized and racialized under the sign of innocence (see Kincaid 1998 and Bernstein 2011), then the granting of agency to sexting girls by feminist and queer scholars needs to be problematized too. The granting of technological sovereignty to girls sexting is a good example of a reverse discourse on sexuality (see, for one example, Tiidenberg 2014). And as Michel Foucault (1990, 102, emphasis added) counsels, discourses on sexuality can “circulate *without changing their form* from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.” A reversal affirms the sexual agency of girls through a technological sovereignty derivative of the same juridical conception of power that otherwise threatens to punish them as child pornographers.

Seeing girls as digital agents casts sexting as a creative use of technology for girlish pleasure and self-making. Yet, if the plasticity ascribed to girls in American culture locks them between agency and passivity, what supplement is strong enough to break that dialectic and manifest recognizable agency? The answer seems to be a racialized cultivation of plasticity. It is less observed that the plasticity of girls, in its normative register, is also a formal quality of whiteness. Plasticity is a useful conception of the gendered body, but it also names a major form that whiteness takes as a racial formation. As Arun Saldanha (2007, 197) puts it, “whiteness is a force whose strength [...] lies in its concurrent implicitness and plasticity.” Drawing on Franz Fanon, Saldanha suggests that “what can be called ‘the fact of whiteness’ is that whites *continually overcome themselves*” (197, emphasis in original), that whiteness names a historically contingent capacity for reinvention, a reaching beyond the self, and the granting of agency to bodies that remain implicitly white in order to appear universal and emancipatory. This ought to be a problem in trying to ascribe agency to sexting girls, for if we agree that girls incarnate plasticity in digital culture, then those “girls” are always already figured as *white* girls.³ If girlishness, as plastic, is animated by

whiteness, then its technological mode of overcoming or empowerment is an exclusionary basis on which to think the agency of sexting. What's more, sexting should be placed in a genealogy of the production of girls' white sexual innocence in American visual culture through the myth of the black male rapist and the concomitant perverse figuration of black women's and girls' sexuality. The formal whiteness of "girls sexting" is complicit with a historical regime of sexual, legal, and extra-legal violence perpetrated against black bodies that are in turn denied any plasticity, expelled from the possibility of inhabiting girlhood altogether.⁴ If a critical engagement with sexting is to account for, rather than bypass, the racist history of representing girlish innocence in the United States, a different scenography of gender and the digital is needed.

Instead of granting girls a form of technological sovereignty while sexting, this essay pauses to take a selfie of the *adult* subjects – parents, educators, and sex-positive feminists and queers – attached to this form of agency for girls. If sexuality remains an alluring reparative trap by offering, through a reverse discourse sustained by whiteness, a way of transforming girls as objects into subjects, this essay problematizes that gesture as a racially normative one, reading it also alongside the relation of technology to what Luce Irigaray terms *sexuate difference* (a concept that directs the problem of irreducible difference away from reduction to either biology or sexuality).⁵ To speculate on how the scenography of sexting could be seen differently by adults, this essay suspends the search for authentic meaning and knowledge, following an intuition that we cannot presently see anything behind the image of the sext: there is only vulnerability and its opposite, a mode of agency that relies on whiteness to overcome passivity. Instead, after examining how criminal law breaks the tension between vulnerability and agency by perpetuating the objectification of girls, this essay takes a speculative turn with Irigaray and Avital Ronell's writings on Martin Heidegger and the question of modern technology to make feminist sense of the non-sovereignty of the girl who sexts.

Live sext acts: *Miller v. Skumanick's* Traffic in Girls

Thus, the cycle of pornography: it makes men child abusers who sentimentalize and degrade their objects; meanwhile, because young girls and women need to survive both materially and psychically in a culture of abuse, they become addicted to the stereotypical structure of sexual value and exploitation, forced to become either subjects in or to pornography. In this way the child's, or the young girl's vulnerability is the scene merely covered over and displaced by the older woman's pseudoautonomy; the young girl's minority is the true scene of arrested development of all U.S. women's second-class citizenship. (Lauren Berlant, "Live Sex Acts")

In *Miller v. Skumanick*, the federal district court for Pennsylvania abstains from deciding whether or not a cellphone image of a girl in a bathing suit at first declared to be an underage sext actually counts as one, which would make it child pornography. Similarly, this essay withholds any finding of fact about that or other images, but for a different reason: it refuses, so far as it can, to perpetuate *any* representation of girls in a culture that rehearses and consumes their erotic innocence while simultaneously punishing their ordinary use of cellphones.

If the content of a true sext is never clear because of the overdetermination of the image by the sexualized innocence imposed on girls, we might turn to the medium. Sexts are a

special case of the era of the selfie, the cultural drive to turn the phone's camera back upon the body. Trafficked through an invisible medium – the network – the conceptual tools with which to think these images in their transmission will come, necessarily, from strange places. One sender is Jacques Derrida (1987), transmitting a fragment from *The Post Card* about the play of telecommunications, a reading of Heidegger's (1982) "The Age of the World Picture." In Derrida's hands, Heidegger's essay is adjusted from the question of science to mass culture to ask how subjects, not just objects, become representable as pictures in the modern era. This postcard-sized quotation, copied and sent again by Richard Dienst (1994) in his study of television, *Still Life in Real Time*, serves as an uncanny theory of the contemporary, digital self(ie): "Here is the scene: caught in the act of representing themselves to themselves, 'modern' subjects place themselves in the 'open circle of the representable,' in a 'shared and public representation.' Thus a subject is defined as 'what can or believes it can offer itself representations,' that is, as something formed by *the imperative to be an image*, in order to receive images" (140, emphasis added). As Dienst proposes, media culture is not based in a linear mode of mediation: to receive images one must also make the self into an image and send it to others, where exchange cannot entail mutual recognition. The drive to make the self a representation, an image to be sent (and received, we hope?), is simultaneously an invitation to receive images (but from whom?) in an endless circuit of transmission.

Is this promiscuous transmission of subjects as images not already pornographic, whether its content is sexual or not? And if the girl is not the cause of the culture of transmission, but is a participant in it, what of her specificity as an image? In "Live Sex Acts" (1995) Lauren Berlant interrogates the logic of pornography in relation to the innocent (white) girl in whose name both right-wing culture wars of sexual regulation and the campaigns of anti-porn state feminism are conducted. Sexting girls represent something like the worst nightmare of anti-porn feminist discourse, for where it insists, again and again, that women and girls are coerced and forced into pornography by men, the girl alone in her bedroom sexting temporarily removes the violent man from the equation and assumes the investment in patriarchal harm first with her own body, by aiming her phone at herself. Were we to ask Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, for instance, they might say that girls only sext because they feel compelled to for boys and men, but all the same, the girls themselves *are* the pornographers, a situation neither could have predicted in the 1980s. About pornographers, Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988, 53) write with their characteristic confidence: they "know exactly what they are doing and to whom; *they just do not care*" (emphasis added). What could be worse, today, than girls knowing "exactly what they are doing and to whom" and yet not caring? Sexting girls threaten to violate their prescribed symbolic role, as Berlant diagnoses it, as passive victims straddling the public and private spheres.

Criminal law tends to agree with anti-porn feminists that girls don't care, but has very different ideas about what should be done about it. In *Miller* a federal court for the first time ruled on the application of child pornography laws to sexting minors, in this case several girls in Pennsylvania. The case was prompted after school officials found images of female students they considered to be sexually explicit circulating between the phones of the student body. The county District Attorney, George Skumanick, sent letters home to the parents of about 20 students, including the girls in the images, informing them that

he would bring child pornography charges against their children if they did not agree to pay \$100 to enroll them in a six-to-nine month “re-education program.” After the parents of three girls refused, Skumanick met with them to make his case. At this meeting he showed them the images in question, hoping they would represent proof of a crime – something he would later prove recalcitrant to do at trial, claiming he was now worried that merely showing them to other people (even the court) made him culpable of distribution of child pornography. A major disagreement took root at this meeting when one of the photos he showed the parents was of a girl clothed in a bathing suit, leaning into the camera. The parents felt strongly that this image was not sexually explicit and so after Skumanick gave them an ultimatum to agree to the re-education class or face criminal proceedings, the parents filed suit in federal court.

The legitimacy of Skumanick’s interpretation of the images as child pornography – and perhaps the reason for which the court declined to rule on this question – lies in the wording of the federal statute, which emphasizes “the use of a minor” merely for the *production* of child pornography, not its content (Waster 2010, 694). Still, the court ruled in favor of the parents, enjoining the DA from bringing charges against the three girls. The rationale of the court’s decision, however, perhaps haunted by the sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s, stages its own liberal feminist rescue of the girls from the perverse insistence of the DA. The ruling hinges, partly, on a First Amendment claim: that the re-education course offered as an alternative to jail by Skumanick is compelled speech. The court finds that the parents could not be forced to pay for their children to enroll in a course during which they would be required to complete a particular essay-writing exercise as part of the “Female Group” portion of the program. In this exercise, as detailed at trial, the girls would have been made to “gain an understanding of what it means to be a girl in today’s society” by responding to the following prompts: describe “What you did,” “Why it was wrong,” answer the question “Did you create a victim?,” and finally explain how sexting “affects the victim, the school, and the community” (*Miller v. Skumanick* 2009, 638). The court sees the essay-writing exercise as an arbitrary form of slut shaming that would force the girls to proclaim themselves responsible for the harm of sexting while also making themselves victims, repeating the structure of the federal child-pornography law. On final appeal, the court adds explicitly: “We agree that an individual District Attorney may not coerce parents into permitting him to impose on their children his ideas of morality and gender roles” (*Miller v. Mitchell* 2010, 22).

Lest this appear an affirmation of the girls’ sexual and legal subjectivity, the decision was made, additionally, on a Fourteenth Amendment claim of “parental autonomy,” the right of *parents* to govern and punish their children for sexting as they see fit (24). The potential punishment of the girls through child-porn law is not extinguished, but merely displaced onto the white, patriarchal family unit. The sexuality of the girls is maintained as exchangeable property by the court, trafficked first between students at school, then between school officials and the DA, now put into the hands of parents. (Some of the parents may have chosen not to “punish” their children, but that would hardly have escaped the governmental function the court assigns to the family through the recognizable white-supremacist logic of rescuing white girlhood and chastity from the public sphere.)

In addition to the familiar narrative of objectification and slut-shaming that *Miller* rehearses there is an implicit theory of the educable social-media user in this decision.

Whereas the logic of the child-porn statute that the DA intended to use against the girls made them both criminally responsible for abuse, while simultaneously its passive victims, the re-education program sought to break that contradiction by returning the girls to the developmentally irresponsible, but teachable, space of childhood. The essay-writing exercise would have served as proof of their plasticity as girls, their capacity for performative internalization of the gendered and sexual propriety of white womanhood as taught by adults. The girls would have become enlightened digital users, responsible practitioners of social media and cellphones. In preventing the DA from acting, the court does not challenge this assumption that girls ought to be governed by an adult sexual pedagogy of propriety, but merely reassigns its labor from the public sphere to the private sphere. The blaming of the girls as irresponsible is in this way able to stand in for a blaming of technology. As the feminist scholars taken up below will specify, the girl serves as a convenient displacement of a cultural anxiety about vulnerability actually caused by technology, not gender.

If sexting, following Dienst and Derrida, merely conforms to the widespread logic of transmission in digital culture, *Miller* also raises a broader question. If sexts are overdramatized by criminal law in order to hold girls responsible, are they really lively enough for a feminist or queer politics of re-signification? Writing in the 1990s, Berlant uses “live sex acts” to refer to “what we might call sex acts on the live margin, sex acts that threaten because they do not aspire to the privacy protection of national culture, nor to the narrative containment of sex into one of the conventional romantic forms of modern consumer heterosexuality” (385). Can we speak, though, of live *sext* acts? Do sexts accrue such disruptive force in an era when the Internet has rendered surveillance and exposure the norm? For as spectacular as the narrative becomes in *Miller*, its reversed interpretation as a subversive feminist or queer act might also assume a kind of liveliness that ultimately misses a radical, if boring point: sexting, for many girls, is ordinary.⁶ As new media becomes “habitual,” in Wendy Chun’s (2014) formulation, the dramatic scenography of passive victims and subversive cultural rebels seems to lose more and more of its convincing heroics. This ordinariness is passed over by the law, moreover, while the very text of the court’s decision acts as yet another sexualizing medium.⁷ If the content of sexts is always under dispute, do they possess the feminist or queer animacy adequate to overcoming the violent logic of the law in objectifying girls a second time and blaming technology for making them more of what they apparently already are: irresponsible? Do sexting girls offer a different theory of the girl’s sovereignty as user?

Technology and sovereignty’s supplement: or, is the phone always a phallus?

A genealogy of the sext might begin by noting that its immediate precedents include the webcam self-broadcasting of “camgirls” and “camwhores” popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Senft 2008). Although sexting was first confined to the erotic economy of text messages, the advent of the smartphone has made possible the rapid proliferation of the sext as image, the auto-pornographic mode of representation of the contemporary subject of social media. How can we approach the smartphone as a technology of sexting? No doubt, Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) theory of media is put under duress by the introduction of the girl’s body into the equation: is her sext defined by the message,

or the medium? Which one is her body and which one is the phone, or the image? The smartphone, with its handheld screen, remediates, in the sense that McLuhan identifies that tendency in all media, not just the analog telephone of Alexander Graham Bell, but also the computer, the Internet, and the television (see Bolter and Grusin 2000). Text messages remediate the voice of the telephone in alphabetic graphemes and emoticons, while the interface of the Operating System remediates the desktop computer on a handheld scale and mobile web-browsing apps remediate the Internet. Television is also remediated, as Dienst and Derrida suggested in their reflections on the desire to make the self into an image and transmit it to someone else.

Perhaps we must reach further, though, to grasp how the smartphone has been turned into a ready-to-hand supplement of sovereignty for granting agency to feminized subjects, and not only “back” in the sense of genealogical time, to the invention of the telephone, but also to its iconic role in the question concerning technology in Western culture. Blaming girls for sexting is in part a way of blaming individuals for the vulnerabilities actually engendered by the network and the way it places us all under the latent threat of exposure through dense and hidden matrices of relation, not to mention its centrality to the exploitative economies of neoliberal labor and consumption. The blaming of girls for sexting converges with a cultural anxiety that children know more about the Internet and social media than adults. When girls sext, in other words, they are doing something that only adults should do, but that they paradoxically know more about than adults. This mal-distribution of technical knowledge between children and adults makes the latter feel even more vulnerable and unknowing online.

The telephone and smartphone are not incidental to the feeling of vulnerability and its fantasized resolution. Avital Ronell (1989, 7) insists in *The Telephone Book* that the telephone is a good place to start to understand vulnerability because the device functions as nothing less than a “synecdoche for technology” in general. The telephone is disorienting to the modern self, even as it pretends to be an extension of the body by imitating the ear. The telephone’s “atotality as apparatus” (3) leads to the startling conclusion that it is a fetish and prosthesis of the maternal body, an uncanny fact Ronell extracts not only from the circumstances of its invention by Bell, but from the history of psychoanalysis and philosophy, and their many elliptical references to strange calls from the Other. As Elissa Marder (2012, 113) notes in reading *The Telephone Book*, Ronell establishes how “technological objects come into being as symptomatic responses to certain conceptions and repressions of the body,” particularly the female body. The technological drive aims both to overcome the loss of the disavowed feminine body in Western culture and in so doing to make up for the fact that all bodies are fragmented and plugged into circuits of transmission from which there is no self-possession to recuperate, except in constituting technology as a supplement.

Ronell focuses her deconstructive tour of the telephone on Heidegger, whose eventual blind spot on the question concerning technology, she suspects, tries to resolve the intrusion of, among others, the female body, by wishing “to secundarize, ontologically speaking, technology” (1989, 19). By holding in “The Question Concerning Technology” (1982) that modern technology covers up a more authentic, poetic relation to Being by transforming nature and humans into mere “standing-reserve” for technocratic regimes, Heidegger works overtime, according to Ronell, to save the possibility of domesticating technology

to sovereign human action. And yet, the incessant calls that Heidegger refuses to answer throughout *The Telephone Book* (not the least of which is one from the Nazi Party) attest to the stubborn remainders of the philosophical repression of technology. Many of the calls are also from feminized subjects, who are made to represent the dispossession of human being by technology. One would be the “young girl” in “The Thing” (1982) who serves as Heidegger’s ground for the inhumanity of objects: things are really just like girls, the anecdote seems to imply. The girl is thingly in order to confirm the ontological animacy of non-things, of thinking beings and subjects. If the young girl desires to be recognized as a thinking being and a subject, Heidegger leaves her little option other than to take up the supplement of technology and domesticate it to a version of masculine sovereignty – to repeat the very move that was first constituted on her exclusion.

Where Ronell maps the work done by the telephone to make the mother’s body disappear and to make the girl appear like a thing, Luce Irigaray wonders if the feminine might not desire an entirely different symbolic economy – including an economy authored by girls. Although she writes sparingly on technology, Irigaray too suspects that Heidegger’s confidence in the non-technological essence of technology is symptomatic of a threat to the sovereignty of his thought: the feminine body and its association with nature. In *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (1999) Irigaray proposes, like Ronell, that technology is constituted as a supplement to cover over the negation of nature in Western culture. Well before the telephone starts ringing, Heidegger compromises his critique of technology in Irigaray’s eyes by grounding Being in a metaphysical architectonics, with the *logos* serving as a dream of cutting the subject loose from nature and the feminine to dwell in an abstract house of being: language, the first technology (86). “It is thus that Heidegger’s hostility to, or suspicion of, science and technology can be understood,” (87) concludes Irigaray. “From being a creator [of language], has he not become a machine in the service of his creation?” (147), “wouldn’t man be essentially technocratic? And wouldn’t his language be his mode of technocratically dwelling in the world” (158)? To simulate sovereignty from nature and the feminine, the masculine subject cuts himself off from relation and turns other beings into tools over which he can fantasize mastery. No wonder the young girl is for Heidegger a thing: in mastering her, she displaces the originary vulnerability the metaphysical concept of language introduces into masculine subjectivity.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, Irigaray (2001) also worries about the telephone at length in another essay, emphatically titled “How Can I Touch You if You Are Not There?” Not only the telephone, either, but also the radio, the airplane, the television, and the fax machine trouble her. Any form of “long-distance communication” based on transmission and mediation – to which it is not difficult to add the digital – incurs “a forgetting of the temporality which is necessary for our lives and for our exchanges with others” (94). Describing a long-distance phone call to a beloved, she writes: “Sometimes I hear you – but where are you? – sometimes I see you, but completely changed: luminous but without volume, without weight or materiality. I see you, but who or what have you become? And how do I touch you, how am I touched by you through such metamorphoses: in presence, in representation?” (96). One answer might be, borrowing from Dienst and Derrida again, that the other has become an image. As the era of mass media compels subjects to turn themselves into representations, Irigaray proposes that media offer nothing intrinsic to cultivating a relation between two sexually different subjects:

But how do we caress an image? Is it not already cold, insensible, dead? (79) [...] Always separated or reduced to a single embrace or to a single deluge, always divided between one who is subject and one who is object, one who is active and one who is passive, one who has intention and one who remains nature and experiences it, we have not built a between-us, and such a lack has left us in the hands of the language of the television set. (100).

Where Ronell puts under erasure the way in which the telephone serves as a phantasmatic phallus for the subject's sense of sovereignty, a poor compensation for the conversion of girls into things, Irigaray adds that the masculine economy of subjectivity is by definition unmoved by any gesture of belatedly giving the supplement to girls. Until the telephone, television, or any technology is submitted to a cultivation of a different symbolic economy of subjectivity, which for Irigaray must find its creative basis in sexuate difference, it will matter little to equally distribute technical capacities in the hands of girls and boys. Giving the smartphone, as phallus, to girls, in other words, is to repeat the founding gesture of the problem, not resolve it.

Although Irigaray's alarmist indictment of media has led to her being read as technophobic (see Murphy 2007), she is at least able to point out that technologies cannot in and of themselves resolve their function as supplements to exclusionary forms of sovereignty based on a sexed hierarchy. Against the impulse to employ a reverse discourse of sexual liberation to confer subjectivity upon the objectified girl, Irigaray insists that no such capacity preexists a reflection on and modification of the economy of subject and object in which the girl was produced as object of consumption. The phone, whether analog or "smart," need not be a phallus, for Irigaray, but it has been and will continue to be one so long as technology is taken as the ground for its own politics.

Had they been interlocutors in *Miller*, Irigaray and Ronell would likely have refused to interpret the images of the girls at hand in that case. By noting how the girl's body is entangled as an image with the question of technology, they suggest that it should not be subject to yet another will to see the truth, one that would repeat the metaphysical gesture of appropriating the girl's body through technology. In the digital era the will to see the network behind images is a drive to represent the un-representable – a desire to objectify what is unintelligible about the network by rendering it as a fixed image. One of the associated effects of this will to know has been to overread sexual and confessional images for meaning, as we might expect after Foucault (1990). As Chun (2014) explains, the confessional genre, in which the user occupies a generic template with a singular narrative through media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram, lends itself to so many undecidable debates, often in comment sections, over whether or not posts by girls confessing to self-harm, bullying, and suicidal thoughts are "real" or "fake." Much like with sexting, commenters make claims to seeing past the surface of the image and into the truth of the girl on display. In this they share the motivations of the adults involved in *Miller* and act out its theory of the user as a subject whose sovereignty is always under threat from the network and can only be recuperated by domesticating technology. Not surprisingly, this domestication also repeats the objectification of the girl.

Given Ronell and Irigaray's critiques of technology as a supplement to a masculine symbolic economy, as well as Warren-Crow and Saldanha's insight that girlish plasticity is formally complicit with the sovereign force of whiteness, this essay offers an alternative

reading of girls sexting: that we *adults* might admit we cannot see anything behind the image of the sexual girl, no rational or irrational subject to be blamed or rescued, no truth or meaning waiting to be revealed. If the only accessible form of agency to girls within the bounds of contemporary digital culture is given over to an economy of masculine supplements and whiteness, then perhaps curious adults must suspend the will to know and focus instead on the underlying assumptions about sovereignty that frame girls as trapped between vulnerability and agency in the first place.

Conclusion: girls lean in everywhere

To those who critique the criminal punishment of sexting girls but still wonder what girls are “really” doing and if it isn’t all too risky, we can reply that the network makes us all vulnerable to exposure, and that the anxiety over the sexual girl’s body-as-image serves to discipline her sexuality through a pedagogy of social-media responsibility. For this same reason, the debate over whether or not sexts and selfies are harmful or empowering is not the best place to concentrate the efforts of feminist critique and creativity, for even the granting of agency partakes in a certain understanding of girls’ plasticity that is a property of whiteness. Still, sensational headlines propagate with increasing frequency, it seems, explaining that selfies, for instance, are leading to an epidemic of head lice (Roy 2014), or that cultural propriety is crumbling under the weight of disrespectful #funeral #selfies (selfiesatfunerals.tumblr.com). At the same time, Sheryl Sandberg calls her neoliberal feminist movement for women’s “practical” advancement *Lean In*, borrowing a phrase also used to describe the posture of both the selfie and the sext (LeanIn.Org 2014). After the first four women to pass U.S. Marine infantry training in 2013 posted a much-circulated selfie to Instagram to celebrate their success, Rachel Simmons (2013) penned an article at *Slate.com* arguing that selfies “empower” girls in the sense that “the selfie is a tiny burst of pride.” Simmons says of the female Marine selfie: “Maybe we adult women, of the Lean In generation, have something to learn here.” (This comes about a decade after pictures of another kind of “empowered” female soldier at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq solicited a very different reaction, reminding us how images of “emancipated” women and girls have been easily folded into war machines nourished by the imperialism of white feminism.)

Perhaps there is, as Simmons says, a pedagogical lesson for adults in so many images of women and girls caught in fierce public debate, but it is surely not a lesson formed out of a reverse discourse of sexual empowerment, nor its shaming inversion as deluded self-objectification. A more difficult pedagogy is one in which adults learn not to exercise their will to know what girls are “really” doing online and on their phones. Some 90 years have passed since an excerpt from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* published by feminists in New York City was banned for a sexual scene containing the commonplace fact that “Girls lean back everywhere,” which at the time meant to subtly display the erotic female body to attentive onlookers. And over a decade has passed since Edward de Grazia’s (1992) study of censorship in the United States borrowed that evocative phrase as its title. Today, however, girls lean *in* everywhere, whether taking selfies or sexting. Rather than another dramatic scene in an endless battle over the impossible sovereignty of the feminist subject, perhaps the ordinary practice of sexting girls confronts us with giving up our desire to know and instead

interrogate the restriction of sovereignty to masculine and white forms of supplemented agency. The young girl is surely not, as Heidegger would have it, a thing, but perhaps we must also admit that we know nothing more of her by imagining an agentic subject waiting behind the shimmering surface of the image of a sext.

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Notes

1. The scholarship on sexting is incredibly interdisciplinary. Much of it is based in the social sciences, where both quantitative and qualitative studies map the content of a discourse on sexuality around girls sexting, its economy of representation, and the gendered forms of violence incurred both through sexting and its juridical punishment. This essay, drawing on that work, is nevertheless located within a specific critical and speculative frame of feminist theory, queer theory, and performance studies, so it does not pretend to address the entirety of the feminist engagement with sexting, which is certainly not reducible to a whole.
2. As Kathryn Bond Stockton details (2009, 146–153), the sexual girl is a categorical contradiction. Taking up the various incarnations of *Lolita*, Stockton notes that the sexual girl spoils the pleasure of the adult pedophilic and pedagogic gaze to the extent that she expresses an active, knowing position that cannot be consumed as erotic innocence. The contradiction here is instructive, for it troubles the straightforward reliability of sexuality as a source of agency for girls: children are eroticized by and for adults because they are rendered as innocent, with a sexuality that has been delayed. For a girl to become a sexual subject, then, is to threaten her status as a child, more often than not turning her into a woman.
3. This is *not* because only white girls sext, or because I am ignoring that girls of color sext: I am not making an empirical or normative claim. Rather, I am arguing that girlishness in American culture is a form that whiteness takes at the level of figuration. "Girls" (as a cultural figuration that does not coincide with actually living girls) are racialized to such an extent that it is actually deleterious to think about girls of color sexting without problematizing the basic frames of agency-as-plasticity that overdetermine them in digital culture. Not only that, but the whiteness of sexting casts girls of color sexting outside of the economy of representation of girlhood, so that they appear more adultlike. Here I am building on work by other feminist scholars. Renold and Ringrose (2013, 249) point out that the sex panic over girls sexting is also "a white middle class panic over the desire for and loss of a raced and classed sexual innocence." And Laura Karaian (2014, 284) notes how the politics of sexual responsibility deployed in social campaigns about sexting are derivative of an anxious affirmation of white chastity as a key strategy in the reproduction of white supremacy.
4. The literature investigating the historical production, since the antebellum period, of white sexual purity in girls and women through the violence of the myth of the black male rapist and the erasure of black women's sexuality, is expansive. For a specific examination of this question in post-bellum American visual culture preceding the digital era, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in Theater and Film Before*

World War II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). This essay argues that sexting ought to be read in light of that history. My thanks go to the Women & Performance collective for suggesting Robinson's work in particular.

5. I use the term "sexuate difference" following Irigaray's practice in her recent work, where "sexuate" marks a difference from the sometimes-misleading translation of her work as on "sexual" difference in the Anglo-American setting. "Sexuate" aims, in particular, to distance itself from both "sexuality" and the sexual drive. It also distances itself from an essential, or biological, rendering of "sex." Sexuate difference does not coincide with male and female.
6. And as "revenge porn" makes clear, ordinary does not necessarily mean "good." It can just as well describe violence that has become so pervasive as to be regularized. Interestingly, many jurisdictions are now passing criminal laws proscribing revenge porn, treating it like sexting (see Salter, Crofts and Lee 2013, 302).
7. Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988, 37) inadvertently emphasize this when they reassure readers of *Pornography and Civil Rights* that they are not producing pornography themselves in order to combat it (while we can object that they most certainly are): "Pornography is *not* what pornography says. If it were, the [Minneapolis anti-porn] Ordinance's definition of pornography would be itself pornography, because it says exactly what pornography is."

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