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Resisting the Subject: A Feminist-Foucauldian Approach to Countering Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT: This essay makes a case for the relevance of Foucault's critique of modern Western subjectivity for feminist efforts toward countering sexual violence against women. In his last four Collège de France courses, Foucault shows that subjectivity produces a normalizing relation of the self to itself, the effects of which extend beyond the self in equally harmful ways. As I see it, this harm is especially damaging to women who have experienced sexual violence; moreover, it inhibits effective feminist resistance to such violence. Through analyzing a particular instance of feminist activism, I argue for the anti-normalizing potential of a contemporary mode of self-relation that functions in a way analogous to that fostered by the ancient practice of *parrhēsia*.

Keywords: Feminism, *parrhēsia*, sexual violence, subjectivity.

*I will call subjectivization the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity, which is of course only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness.*¹

Introduction

During the summer of 2008, a series of rapes occurred in the Garneau neighborhood of the city of Edmonton in Alberta, Canada. Police advised women residing in Garneau, "especially the ones who live alone, to be vigilant about locking their doors and their windows and securing their homes," not to go out at night unaccompanied, and to report suspicious activity.² In the face of both the rapes themselves and what can be described as at best paternalism and at worse victim-blaming on behalf of the police, an anonymous grass-roots organization referring to itself as the "Garneau Sisterhood" emerged. The Sisterhood articulated three broad objectives: "organizing and mobilizing to catch the most recent serial rapist in the neighbourhood, challeng[ing] the culture of violence and, reclaim[ing] safe spaces for people in their communities."³ A key strategy employed in pursuit of these objectives was a public poster campaign that critiqued the police, confronted the rapist, and called attention to the underly-

¹ Michel Foucault, "Final Interview," *Raritan Review* 5(1), 1-13.

² Ben Gelinas, "Southside sex attack makes four," *Edmonton Journal*, August 12, 2008.

³ See <http://garneausisterhood.weebly.com/index.html>.

ing sexism that pervades and is thus rearticulated through prevailing constructions of and attitudes concerning sexual violence against women.

Feminists have presented the Sisterhood's actions as both undermining stereotypically gendered "rape scripts" and problematizing the neoliberal "privatization and individualization" of sexual violence that has effectively reduced prevention efforts to mere techniques of risk management.⁴ Ultimately, from a feminist perspective the Garneau Sisterhood's activism is viewed as effective because it counters the objectification of women that occurs in rape and sexual assault by asserting women's active agency—by, in other words, asserting women as subjects. The view that effective resistance to women's oppression necessarily entails the assertion of their subjectivity is widely held among feminists, and it contributes in large part to a sustained, general dubiousness concerning the feminist relevance of the work of Michel Foucault. Many feminists identify useful tools for social criticism within Foucault's work. But insofar as Foucault views subjectivity as a mode of constituting, understanding, and relating to ourselves that implicates us in normalizing relations of power, he is considered to undermine the necessary vehicle through which positive social transformation may occur.⁵

In contrast to such views, this essay draws upon Foucault's critique of the modern Western subject in order to show that, given the nature of the self-relation that characterizes and is reproduced by subjectivity, asserting the subjectivity of women who have been raped and sexually assaulted is ultimately insufficient as a strategy of resistance. After providing an overview of my position, I turn to Foucault's work in order to show that from his perspective alternative modes of self-relation are possible, and to explore one mode that, as he describes it, opposes and thereby counters subjectivity's harmful effects. In his late work, Foucault establishes a relationship between the way in which one constitutes, understands, and relates to oneself and the way in which one conducts oneself in the world. Given this relationship, modes of self-relation that I refer to as "desubjectifying" (where desubjectification entails constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself in ways other than as a subject) reflect resistance at the level of the self that also have the potential to promote the same within a broader social context. By way of conclusion I return to the Garneau Sisterhood in order to argue that its anti-sexual violence activism is in fact desubjectifying, and to (re)consider its effectiveness and feminist relevance accordingly.

⁴ Katherine Mazurok, "Universally Particular: The Garneau Sisterhood's Challenge to the Rape Script," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 22(2), 463-484; Lise Gotell, "Third Wave Antirape Activism on Neoliberal Terrain: The Garneau Sisterhood," in *Sexual Assault in Canada: Law, Legal Practice and Women's Activism*, edited by Elizabeth Sheehy (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2012).

⁵ Nancy Hartsock writes: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" See Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 163.

I

The last four lecture courses Foucault delivered at the Collège de France,⁶ as well as several of his public lectures and interviews from the same time period, offer an expansive and in-depth genealogy of the modern Western subject. Taken as a whole, these texts both elucidate fundamental problems with subjectivity and also raise the possibility that alternative modes of self-constitution, -understanding, and -relation can be developed and undertaken. Elucidation of problems occurs primarily in the 1980 and 1982 Collège courses. Here, Foucault argues that from a modern perspective, to be a subject is by definition to have access to the truth. Within ancient Greek, Hellenistic Greek and Roman, and early Christian contexts, by contrast, such access had to be achieved. Subjectivization, the process of constituting oneself as a subject, was therefore necessarily transformative, with individuals performing work upon themselves in order to produce requisite changes. This work was accomplished specifically through practices of “conversion.”

Within the context of ancient Greece and later Antiquity, conversion entailed a series of “turnings” of the self in relation to itself. In Platonic conversion (*epistrophē*), one turned away from the material world of appearances and toward one’s “true self,”⁷ whereas in late Antiquity “turning [one’s] gaze back on [oneself]” fostered liberation not from but precisely within the material world.⁸ Because the ultimate aim of conversion was self-sufficiency, the subordination an individual experienced while being guided through these various self-turnings was merely temporary.

Early Christian conversion (*metanoia*), by contrast, was characterized not by a series of turnings but rather by a break or “upheaval” within the self.⁹ *Metanoia*, understood as the total renunciation or sacrifice of the self’s previous sinful iteration, entailed a “radical change of thought and mind,” a singular, sudden transition from one form of existence to another.¹⁰ Moreover, in early Christian conversion the need for guidance was not merely temporary. Foucault shows that this need, and therefore the subordination it necessitated, was formalized and rendered permanent by way of the practice of confession. Thus from Foucault’s perspective, confession laid the ground for the interconnection of subjectivity with obedience.¹¹

Like baptism and penitence, the two historically prior practices of conversion Foucault analyzes, confession outwardly expresses the self’s transformation and, hence, its suitability to have access to the truth. Whereas baptism and penitence are corporeal, however, the outward expression that occurs in confession is verbal. Foucault explains that once thoughts—“not

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Du Gouvernement des vivants [On the Government of the Living]: Cours au Collège de France (1979-1980)*, edited by François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, with Michel Senellart (Paris: Hautes Études, Gallimard/Seuil, 2012); Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2010); and Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 209.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, especially the lectures of 10 and 17 February.

desires, not passions, not attitudes, not acts” — come to be seen as reflecting the contents of the soul, mere *self*-examination and -analysis are inadequate to the task of determining the soul’s state.¹² In a 1980 lecture, Foucault tells the story of a young monk who stole bread because he was unable to sustain a fast.¹³ The theft is eventually discovered, and the monk confesses and returns the bread. At that moment, “a light seems to tear itself away from his body and across the room. Then, a disgusting smell of sulphur spreads all around.”¹⁴ What allows for the impurity of the young monk’s thoughts (and hence of his soul) to be revealed, Foucault argues, is neither that he has returned the bread nor that his master now knows the truth about what he has done; rather, it is the act of the confession itself: impure thoughts can be identified on the basis of the difficulty one experiences in putting them into words and speaking them aloud. Verbal confession therefore provides a means of separating pure (easy to articulate) and impure (difficult to articulate) thoughts and, hence, of eradicating the latter and ensuring that the soul has been cleansed. “Satan,” Foucault explains, “as a symbol of evil, is incompatible with the light and he resists the thoughts under which he hides until confession drives him from the dark caverns of the unconscious into the light of explicit discourse.”¹⁵

The view that thoughts reflect the state of the soul also functions to establish confession as a sustained, life-long practice. Since thoughts are dynamic, they must be continually (re)-examined for signs of encroaching impurity — that is, an individual’s thoughts must be examined by another person who, possessing the knowledge and authority to interpret the soul’s contents, effectively functions as “the image of God.”¹⁶ The requirement of confession for both verbalization and on-going regularity thus solidifies and makes permanent an interconnection of subjectivity with self-renunciation and obedience: salvation — access to truth — requires the renunciation of one’s old, sinful self, and this renunciation can be ensured only through rendering oneself permanently obedient to the authority to whom one must regularly confess. “Verbalization,” Foucault contends, “is a way for... conversion, for the rupture of the self. It is a way for the conversion to develop itself and take effect. Since under the reign of Satan the human being was attached to himself, the verbalization as a movement towards God is a renunciation of Satan. It is for the same reason a renunciation of oneself.”¹⁷

Foucault argues that the conceptualization within early Christian conversion of a self that can and must be interpreted and deciphered provides the ground for the hermeneutical self-relation that characterizes modern Western subjectivity. Modern subjectivization as he

¹² Michel Foucault, “Christianity and Confession.” Foucault delivered the Howison Lectures, “Truth and Subjectivity” and “Christianity and Confession,” at the University of California Berkeley on October 20th and 21st, 1980. I am referencing versions that are housed in the Michel Foucault Archive of the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l’édition Contemporaine) in Caen, France; the archive folder numbers are FCL 3.4 & FCL2. A03-04, and D2(1), respectively. Slightly different versions of these lectures were delivered at Dartmouth College in November of 1980. The Dartmouth lectures appear in *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, edited by Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 158-181.

¹³ Foucault, “Christianity and Confession.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

sees it thus inherits and continues to be characterized by a power relation that is clearly normalizing. "Normalization," for Foucault, refers to the interconnection of increased capacities with increasingly limited and limiting ways of exercising them. Persons become adept at performing a very narrow range of actions and behaviors that, insofar as they are performed repeatedly over time, come to be seen as both natural and necessary—as simply "normal" behavior. At the same time, modes of thinking and acting that deviate from established norms appear as "abnormal" and thus in need of sanction, up to and including elimination. The resulting reinscription of prevailing norms and simultaneous inhibition of both alternatives and the conditions for their possibility in turn delimits the circulation of power. Society thus moves toward domination, a condition in which individuals or groups are deprived of their capacity to act and are instead merely acted upon or determined.

Within the self-relation that modern Western subjectivity inherits, increased capacities (accessing the truth and attaining salvation) are acquired at the expense of multiple and varied ways in which they might be exercised. New capacities are merely directed back into recreating the conditions for their possibility: permanent obedience to an authority who interprets an individual's thoughts in order to ensure their purity and, hence, continued access to truth and salvation. In the face of this normalizing interconnection of subjectivity and self-renunciation, Foucault identifies a sustained and concerted effort within the tradition of Western philosophy to "save" the "hermeneutics of the self" while at the same time "[get] rid of the necessity of sacrifice of self which was linked to this hermeneutics since the beginning of Christianity"—to, in other words, substitute the autonomous subject for the self-sacrificing and obedient one.¹⁸ Such a strategy is ineffective and ultimately normalizing in its own right. Because self-renunciation is a condition for the possibility of subjectivity, the hermeneutical mode of self-relation that characterizes the latter cannot be retained without also retaining and thereby rearticulating the former. Moreover, asserting autonomy and its ostensibly positive aspects as defining subjectivity effectively masks this retention and rearticulation, thereby perpetuating a normalizing cycle wherein the self is continually renounced and reasserted.

Given the failure of the Western philosophical tradition to counter the self-renouncing and obedient character that subjectivity inherits, Foucault raises the possibility of exploring alternative modes of self-relation. "Maybe," he suggests, "the problem... is to change those technologies [of the hermeneutical self-relation], or maybe to get rid of those technologies, and then, to get rid of the sacrifice which is linked to those technologies."¹⁹ Foucault's genealogy of the modern Western subject illustrates that, as expressed in the epigraph to this essay, subjectivity is simply one possible way of constituting, understanding, and relating to ourselves. Exploring alternative ways of doing so comes through exercising precisely those capacities that subjectivity inhibits: our critical and creative—or *disobedient*—capacities. Such exercise comprises the practice of freedom.

For Foucault, freedom does not entail extricating ourselves from power; as he sees it, such extrication is neither possible nor desirable. Moreover, while he acknowledges that in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Foucault, "Christianity and Confession."

some instances liberation “is indispensable for the practice of liberty,”²⁰ Foucault nonetheless maintains a distinction between liberation and freedom.²¹ From his perspective, one may be considered liberated when one attains the status of subject (one moves out of a state of domination where one is a merely determined object). Yet in uncritically embracing subjectivity, as I have shown, individuals fail both to analyze its effects as a mode of self-relation and to entertain the possibility of alternative modes. As a result, the cycle of self-assertion and—renunciation that Foucault exposes and aims to interrupt is rearticulated. When we merely assert ourselves as subjects, we thereby keep in play the dynamic of obedience and conformity that subjectivity, construed in terms of autonomous and rational agency, is supposed to overcome—which of course makes us assert ourselves as subjects all the more vigorously. Hence Foucault’s unease about the tendency he identifies within modern Western societies to take liberation as the sum total of freedom and his “distrust” of the “theme of liberation” in general.²² “[I]f one does not treat [the theme of liberation] with a certain number of safeguards and within certain limits,” he argues,

there is the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which... found itself concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism. In that hypothesis it would suffice to unloosen these repressive locks so that man can be reconciled with himself, once again find his nature or renew contact with his roots and restore a full and positive relationship within himself.²³

Properly understood, liberation paves the way for freedom, which is itself not a singular act but rather a practice. In a 1980 interview, Foucault identifies three “values” or individual practices which together can be seen as comprising freedom in a broad sense.²⁴ The first practice is “refusal,” specifically refusal “to accept as self-evident the things that are proposed to us.” The second is curiosity, which Foucault describes as “the need to analyze and to know, since we can accomplish nothing without reflection and knowledge.” The third practice is innovation, “to seek out in our reflection those things that have never been thought or imagined.”²⁵ So conceived, practicing freedom is characteristically disobedient and counter to normalization: it stands in a critical relationship to prevailing norms and values, on the one hand, and cultivates alternative modes of thinking and acting, and hence of relating to ourselves and the world, on the other. Whereas normalization is characterized by a paucity or even absence of alternatives to prevailing norms, practicing freedom involves actively navigating power relations in such a way as to provide opportunities for experimenting with multiple, diverse,

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of Care for the Self as the Practice of Freedom,” in *The Final Foucault*, edited by James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 2.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual. An Interview with Michel Foucault by Michael Bess, November 3, 1980.” I am referencing the version of this interview that is housed in the IMEC Archive; the archive folder number is FCL2. A02-06. The interview is also available in *History of the Present 4* (Spring 1988) and online at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/michaelbess/Foucault%20Interview>.

²⁵ Ibid.

and even potentially conflicting modes of living. As such, freedom both promotes and is characterized by open and fluid as opposed to constricted or static relations of power.

II

Foucault's genealogy and the critique it entails call into question the idea that asserting subjectivity is in and of itself sufficient as a practice of freedom. This is not to say, however, that asserting women's subjectivity has no strategic feminist value—both generally, and as part of an overall strategy of countering sexual violence against women. From a Foucauldian perspective, such assertion constitutes an act of liberation: it moves women out of a context in which they are merely determined, and where such determination is conveyed in and thereby reasserts decidedly sexist and disempowering terms and conditions. At the same time, the normalizing cycle Foucault describes of affirming ostensibly positive aspects of subjectivity in order to overcome the negative is, as I see it, harmful to women in general and particularly to women who have experienced rape and sexual assault. In the former case, the cycle keeps in play and thus reinforces stereotypical views of women as naturally inclined to put the needs of others before their own. The idea that women are “naturally” self-renouncing reinforces their subordination. For women who have experienced sexual violence, the normalizing cycle of self-renunciation and -assertion can be seen to function as a kind of interminable repetition of violation. It reflects a mode of intelligibility that, insofar as it requires renunciation, also requires and therefore maintains the centrality of that which needs to be renounced—in this case, the sexual violence itself. Prevailing modes of resistance that assert women as survivors also seem to, albeit inadvertently, retain this centrality. In asserting the positive (the survivor) in order to overcome the negative (the victim), such approaches to resistance maintain the harm of sexual violence as central to women's self-relation, thereby perpetuating the normalizing cycle of self-assertion and self-renunciation. Thus Foucault's point that the implicit disobedience contained within an act of liberation must continue to be promoted through an ongoing process of critique and creativity. The critical aspect (the “saying no”) of liberation needs to be conceived of and treated as a refusal that is interconnected with and thus paves the way for the creation of new possibilities. Put differently, refusal is augmented and furthered by way of curiosity and innovation, as all three practices together comprise the exercise of freedom.

Foucault's exposure and analysis of the normalizing cycle that subjectivity perpetuates reveals that the relationship we cultivate with ourselves directly affects the type of relationship we have with the world. To the extent that subjectivity represses our critical and creative capacities—our ability to practice refusal, curiosity, and innovation—it diminishes our ability to navigate prevailing relations of power in ways that are characterized by and in turn promote freedom within a broader sociopolitical context. In what follows, I therefore argue that a disobedient self-relation characterized by refusal, curiosity, and innovation—a desubjectifying mode of self-relation, in other words—might disrupt the continual self-renunciation and assertion that reinscribes the harm inflicted upon women through sexual violence. In doing so, this mode of self-relation might also further feminist political resistance to such violence. Before directly addressing this issue, however, it is important to show that desubjectifying alternatives to subjectivity are possible and to explore their anti-normalizing potential.

III

In his 1983 and 1984 Collège courses, Foucault analyzes as possible alternatives to subjectivity the self-relation formed in and through political and ethical *parrhēsia* (*franc-parler* or “free-spokenness”) as it was practiced within the context of ancient Greece and late Antiquity. As Foucault describes it, *parrhēsia* shares important characteristics with confession but nonetheless gives rise to a very different type of self-relation. Most obviously, like confession, *parrhēsia* is a verbal practice of truth-telling. Moreover, just as the entire contents of the soul is expressed in confession, Foucault asserts that in *parrhēsia* one “tell[s] all,” in the sense that “nothing of the truth” is “hidden” or withheld.²⁶ In his elucidation of how *parrhēsia* differs from performative speech acts, Foucault identifies several additional points of intersection between it and confession. First, through *parrhēsia* one gains access to the truth. This occurs by way of a “doubling effect,” whereby truth becomes manifest in both the verbal statement itself and in the stance of the speaker. “I tell the truth,” Foucault explains, “and I truly think that I am telling the truth when I say it.”²⁷ This doubling or “intensification” of the truth in both the enunciation and the speaker her or himself, Foucault contends, binds the speaker to the truth and in doing so creates a kind of pact “of the speaking subject with himself.”²⁸ Second, then, practicing *parrhēsia* facilitates a particular kind of self-relation; specifically, one constitutes oneself as “the person who tells the truth, who has told the truth, and who recognizes oneself in and as the person who has told the truth.”²⁹ Third, the practice of *parrhēsia* and thus the self-relation it generates are developed in and through one’s relationship to another or others to whom one publicly speaks the truth.³⁰

Foucault’s analysis reveals that despite these formal similarities, *parrhēsia* and confession differ substantively in terms of the overall effects that each practice produces relative to both one’s self-relation and to the truth. In confession, access to the truth comes at the expense of one’s critical and creative capacities, a forfeiture that marks the beginning of a willingness to exchange freedom for the promise of certainty that will become a defining characteristic of the modern West. In *parrhēsia*, by contrast, access to the truth entails exercising freedom, and doing so, moreover, in ways that both generate and promote confrontation with uncertainty and risk. Such confrontation, in turn, develops and provides experience in exercising critique and creativity. Unlike performative speech acts in which “the effect which follows [from an utterance] is known and ordered in advance,” a defining characteristic of *parrhēsia* is the extent to which “the irruption of the true discourse... opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known.”³¹ As Foucault describes it, *parrhēsia* is an oppositional practice. It is generated and exercised within, but is not reducible to and therefore has the capacity to adopt a critical stance relative to, a “general code” or “institutional field.”³²

²⁶ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 10.

²⁷ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁰ In the 1982 course Foucault provides a variety of examples of how this is the case.

³¹ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 62.

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

Given that confession and *parrhēsia* differ in fundamental ways it follows that the self-relations generated by the exercise of each will differ as well. Whereas the defining features of a confessional self-relation and, hence of subjectivity, are (the permanent re-enactment of) self-renunciation and obedience, *parrhēsia* establishes a self-relation characterized by the interconnection of freedom and risk, the courage to confront this interconnection, and thus critical and creative engagement with a reality that is characterized by it. In contrast to the enunciator of a performative speech act, the parrhesiast's speech is not defined and therefore circumscribed by her or his "institutional status."³³ Rather, in *parrhēsia* the speaker exercises "his own freedom as a speaking individual."³⁴ The parrhesiast willingly forges and constitutes her or himself in terms of the pact that marks a relation of both the self to itself, and of the self to the truth. And yet, through exercising this freedom, the parrhesiast simultaneously exposes her or himself to "an unspecified risk" that extends to the imperilment of one's own life.³⁵ "[T]here is always *parrhēsia*," Foucault contends, "when telling the truth takes place in conditions such that the fact of telling the truth, and the fact of having told it, will, may, or must entail costly consequences for those who have told it."³⁶ It is for this reason that Foucault sees courage rather than status to be "at the heart of *parrhēsia*."³⁷

So conceived, a parrhesiastic self-relation represents what in modern/contemporary terms can be characterized as an anti-normalizing alternative to the confessional self-relation that subjectivity inherits and reproduces. Not only does a parrhesiastic self-relation not promote self-renunciation and obedience, the particular manner in which this type of self-relation opposes self-renunciation and obedience creates an opportunity to constitute, understand, and relate to ourselves differently. By radically reducing not merely alternative modes of thought and existence but also the possibility for their development, a normalizing self-relation simplifies the world. In doing so, it also holds out certainty as attainable and, thus, offers security. If I am a subject and that is all I can be, I know the truth about myself and there is no need or ostensibly even possibility for me to try to think differently about myself. Within the context of a normalizing self-relation, truth thus serves a reductionist function. A parrhesiastic self-relation, by contrast, links truth to freedom and risk and thus to indeterminate potentiality. Impermanent, open, and dynamic, there is neither a pre-given notion of what one is nor the renunciation of what one was, but rather an ongoing process of self-cultivation. In the place of certainty and security are possibility and more risk. Described as "a stance, a way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action,"³⁸ *parrhēsia* sounds strikingly similar to a modern mode of self-relation Foucault refers to as a "critical attitude."³⁹ Both reflect oppositional, dis-

³³ Foucault cites examples of chairpersons opening meetings and clergy performing baptisms; *ibid.*, 63-64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁶ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁸ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 14.

³⁹ Foucault describes a critical attitude as "a certain way of thinking, speaking, and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others." That this "certain way" is oppositional and disobedient is reflected in Foucault's contention that critique "only exists in relation to something other than itself;" in this case, to "a total, meticulous,

obedient modes of constituting, understanding, and relating to ourselves that are shaped by and in turn expressed through our interactions with others and the world.

IV

For Foucault, the parrhesiast's identification and critique of oppressive power is the most important external, world-related expression of a parrhesiastic self-relation. An example of such identification and critique to which he returns throughout the 1983 and 1984 Collège courses is Plato's confrontation of the tyrant Dionysus the Elder concerning the harmful nature of tyranny as a form of governing. Political *parrhēsia* is also portrayed and, indeed, figures centrally within Euripides' play, *Ion*, which Foucault analyzes across several lectures of the 1983 course. Yet the play provides examples of other important kinds of *parrhēsia* as well. One of these is judicial *parrhēsia*, which entails "a weak person" who has been the "victim of oppression by [a] strong" person subsequently confronting that individual concerning her or his mistreatment.⁴⁰ The instance of judicial *parrhēsia* that most interests Foucault is performed by Ion's mother, Creusa. Ion was conceived when the god Apollo raped Creusa. At a crucial point in the play's development, she confronts Apollo about the rape, his failure to recognize Ion as his son, and the consequences of both. "Oh!," Creusa cries, "what wretched souls we women are! Oh! the crimes of the gods! Where shall we go to demand justice when it is the iniquity of the powerful that destroys us?"⁴¹

This confrontation exhibits all the key aspects of *parrhēsia* described previously: in speaking the truth (women are violated by those in power and when this happens they have nowhere to turn), Creusa binds herself to it, thus constituting, understanding, and relating to herself as a truth-teller. Lacking any social or political status that legitimizes her speech, in confronting power she exposes herself to risk. The self-relation created through and reflected in her confrontation of Apollo is, therefore, simultaneously stems from and in turn promotes freedom and courage. "What can we do," Foucault asks, "when the iniquity of the powerful destroys us and we must demand justice? We can do precisely what Creusa does ... at risk and danger to [ourselves] ...stand up before the person who committed the injustice and speak."⁴²

That Foucault views Creusa's confronting Apollo as a paradigmatic example of judicial *parrhēsia* and yet fails to remark upon its specifics—a woman confronting the male who raped her—is striking, but not especially surprising.⁴³ Indeed, Foucault goes so far as to interpret

detailed relationship of obedience." See Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotexte, 1997), 24, 25, 26.

⁴⁰ Foucault says that at the time of Euripides the confrontation of the powerful by the disempowered was not considered to be *parrhēsia*, but that this type of confrontation would later come to be characterized as judicial *parrhēsia*. See Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 134.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 135, 136.

⁴³ As I note elsewhere, and as other feminists have argued, Foucault exhibits at best a general insensitivity to issues of sexual assault and at worst blatant sexism. See, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff, "Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia," in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Hekman (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1996), 99-135; Ann J. Cahill, "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body," *Hypatia* 15(1), 43-63; Laura Hengehold, "'An Immodest Proposal: Foucault, Hysterization, and the 'Second Rape,'" *Hypatia* 9(3), 88-107; and Winnifred Woodhull, "Sexuality,

Creusa's reference to "the crimes of the gods"⁴⁴ as referring solely to the harm that Apollo has inflicted upon Ion by failing to recognize him as his son; the harm Apollo inflicted on Creusa herself is unacknowledged.⁴⁵ Foucault's inattention to gender as a power relation notwithstanding, his analysis of Creusa's *parrhēsia* pertains to my argument because it illustrates that a self-relation other than subjectivity possesses political relevance from a feminist perspective. Creusa's speech is *parrhēsia*; as such it is both the product of and in turn produces an oppositional, disobedient self-relation; a self-relation that is not, in other words, subjectivity. Like the practice of *parrhēsia* itself, the parrhesiast exists within but does not merely replicate and therefore need not uncritically support or reproduce prevailing modes of thought and existence. Creusa confronts Apollo from within the context that allowed the violation of rape to occur, but she does so from such a stance and in such a way as to identify and challenge sources of injustice without reproducing the violation of that injustice. Her confrontation of Apollo thus illustrates how a parrhesiastic self-relation fosters development and encourages the exercise of the politically relevant capacity of challenging prevailing structures of power within a given sociopolitical context.

From a modern/contemporary perspective, the self-relation that characterizes *parrhēsia* can be considered desubjectifying and, hence anti-normalizing. By its very definition, subjectivity is not seen as a mode of constituting, understanding, and relating to ourselves at all—let alone, again as Foucault notes in the epigraph to this essay, as simply *one possible* such mode. Rather, subjectivity is posited and experienced as a state of *being*, as what we are and must be; it is a normalizing norm. The risk, as well as the freedom and courage to engage it, that characterize the relationship Creusa has to herself resonate within a contemporary desubjectifying self-relation. An oppositional self-relation acts as a critique not only of subjectivity itself, but also of the prevailing modes of thought and existence that both posit and promote uncritical acceptance of subjectivity as the only way for individuals to constitute, understand, and relate to themselves. By challenging prevailing norms, a desubjectifying self-relation exposes itself to risk, but precisely in doing so it cultivates the ground of freedom by practicing and promoting the refusal, curiosity, and innovation that keep power relations open and fluid. Put differently, a critical stance relative to that which presents itself as natural and necessary fosters

Power, and the Question of Rape," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, edited by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 167-176.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 134-135.

⁴⁵ Both the prevailing view of women as "naturally" self-renouncing and the degree to which such a view reinforces women's subordination are evident in Foucault's contention that Creusa confronts Apollo solely for Ion's sake. As I point out, Foucault simply and uncritically assumes that Creusa is protesting on behalf of her son; as such, he fails to even acknowledge the violation committed against Creusa. Insofar as it inhibits recognition of violations against women, the view of natural feminine self-renunciation functions in support of the gendered status quo, in part by undermining efforts toward women's emancipation, for how can unacknowledged violations be recognized, resisted, or countered? Louise du Toit effectively illustrates these points in her analysis of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She observes that "women were doing most of the public forgiving on behalf of male relatives," rather than forgiving for violations, including widespread sexual violence, they had experienced. As a result, those violations were being left unacknowledged and therefore unaddressed. See Louise de Toit, *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12.

freedom in the specifically Foucauldian sense of challenging prevailing modes of thought and existence so that new, anti-normalizing ways of living become possible.

Significant for contemporary feminists, a desubjectifying self-relation, insofar as it is oppositional, disrupts the cycle of self-renunciation and assertion that characterizes modern Western subjectivity; it is a self-relation that does not make an abject part of oneself that must be perpetually renounced central to who one is. For women who have been raped and sexually assaulted, this means that the violation they have experienced does not define them, that they need not constitute themselves in terms of it. This is not to say that desubjectivization trivializes or dismisses the violation. Rather, it presents women generally and feminists more specifically with the task—one might say the opportunity—to create new, non- and anti-normalizing ways of marking the significance of the violation that occurs in sexual violence. This task is undertaken—this opportunity is seized—through navigating existing power relations in ways that 1) Challenge the status quo of normalizing sexual violence, 2) Critique and thereby draw attention to existing social norms, values, and institutions that promote such normalization and 3) Facilitate the development of alternatives.

Such navigation does not release women from sexist social norms, structures, and institutions that effectively dismiss sexual violence against women as an unfortunate but inevitable aspect of the world in which we live, any more than practicing *parrhēsia* frees Creusa from the constraints of ancient Greek society. Since the beginning of the Second Wave, feminists have documented the harm that victim-blaming inflicts upon women who speak the truth about being raped and sexually assaulted, as well as identified and critically analyzed the degree to which social institutions have failed to provide justice for women in instances of rape and sexual assault.⁴⁶ My aim, then, is not (just as it is not Foucault's) to somehow reproduce *parrhēsia* within a contemporary context. Rather, like him I am concerned with how and to what extent it might be possible to develop contemporary strategies for countering sexual violence against women that produce effects similar to those *parrhēsia* produced within an ancient context—effects that within a contemporary context would be characterized as disobedient and anti-normalizing. If, as I have argued, asserting women as subjects as an end in itself cannot lead to such strategies, then developing and experimenting with alternative modes of self-relation acquires political implications—it extends beyond the self. Hence the feminist significance of Foucault's insight that relating to ourselves differently in turn changes how we relate to the world. Through cultivating a desubjectifying self-relation, our world-relation acquires a critical and creative character marked by refusal to accept that emancipatory political resistance must be grounded in subjectivity and involve at least in some way existing social institutions, curiosity about what alternative forms emancipatory political resistance might take, and innovation of and experimentation with such alternatives.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs* 18(2), 260-290. Chloë Taylor has recently shown that institutions, insofar as they reproduce women as victims and thus perpetuate the cycle of assertion and renunciation within which subjectivity as a mode of self-relation entangles them, do not simply fail to but in fact cannot provide justice. See her essay, "Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes," *Hypatia* 24(4), 1-25.

V

The Garneau Sisterhood provides an example of anti-normalizing feminist activism that is not grounded in subjectivity and does not merely assert women as subjects; moreover, this activism is neither generated within nor reliant upon but instead critical of existing social institutions. The Sisterhood's anti-sexual violence activism is a mode of truth-telling. To be clear: it is not *parrhēsia*. Rather, the speech of the Sisterhood, as reflected in its poster campaign, functions as the kind of disobedient articulation of the truth that Foucault identifies within *parrhēsia* and which, if cultivated within a contemporary context, he suggests might counter normalization.

It is readily apparent that the Sisterhood's speech aims to tell the truth about the rapes occurring in the Garneau neighborhood. The Garneau Sisterhood emerged in response not only to the rapes themselves, but also to a failure on behalf of the Edmonton police department to provide residents of Garneau with full and accurate information about these crimes. Contending that this information would not help women protect themselves or aid in apprehending the rapist, the police admitted to "only releasing certain details about their investigation" which did not include, for example, "how the suspect disguise[d] himself" or the means by which he entered the home of the fourth woman he attacked.⁴⁷ One of the Sisterhood's aims was thus to publicly speak the whole truth about the sexual violence that was occurring — to neither "hide nor withhold" anything.

The second way in which the Sisterhood's speech reflects disobedient, anti-normalizing truth-telling is that the group also aimed *to allow* nothing to be held back. The Sisterhood pursued this aim by calling power to account in and for its unjust execution — by "question[ing] truth on its effects of power and question[ing] power on its discourses of truth."⁴⁸ Like Creusa, the Sisterhood "stand[s] up before the person who committed the injustice and speak[s]." The Sisterhood's confrontation of power regarding acts of injustice is apparent in the content of its posters, particularly those that critique the inherent sexism of the police response to the rapes and address the rapist.⁴⁹ These posters clearly confront power in the form of both a (male-dominated) social institution with the right to use lethal force and prevailing, normalizing gendered power relations within society. Several posters, such as one that asserts, "Start questioning offenders' behavior and not the survivors'," challenge the police (and prevailing social) perspective that women must alter their behavior and limit their actions in order to ensure their safety. Another set of posters both provides critical perspective on and challenges patriarchal police authority and paternalism by, on the one hand, asking what people think about the police response ("What do you think about police warnings regarding sexual offenders?") and, on the other hand, requesting information from women about whether they have or have not reported incidents of sexual violence to the police ("Have you ever reported a sexual assault to police? ...Why or why not? Would anything make you more comfortable reporting?") A more direct challenge comes by way of a call upon persons with information about the rapes to contact not the police but the Sisterhood. The rapist is directly

⁴⁷ Gelinas, "Southside sex attack makes four."

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," 48.

⁴⁹ All of the posters I discuss may be found at <http://garneausisterhood.weebly.com/posters.html>.

addressed and challenged in a number of posters, the most explicit of which states: “Dear Rapist: I am not changing my life for a pathetic fuck like you.” Other posters confront the rapist in a more indirect manner, referring to him as “Rapest.” Recasting him as a mere nuisance makes him less menacing, something to be challenged rather than feared.

Third, the power of the Sisterhood’s speech to both unsettle prevailing norms and effect change neither derives from nor is legitimated by some kind of institutional authority. As a grassroots organization, the Garneau Sisterhood is positioned outside of and to a large degree in opposition to existing social institutions and structures. While clearly not outside of prevailing relations of power, the Sisterhood’s speech is nonetheless free in the sense that it is not generated within and therefore need not merely reflect institutional norms. Its speech binds the Sisterhood not to some external institution, but rather to the truth of that speech and to itself.

Fourth, and finally, precisely because it is free the Sisterhood’s speech lacks institutional protections. Neither situated within nor reflective of the norms and values of social institutions, as well as posing a challenge to prevailing modes of thought and existence more broadly, the Sisterhood’s speech exposes the group as well as its individual members to an unspecified risk. The police heightened this risk by contending that the poster campaign, if not itself an act of vigilantism, at least promoted vigilante justice.⁵⁰ This characterization was clearly intended to marginalize and thereby neutralize the Sisterhood’s activism; in portraying the group as a threat, however, it also tacitly called for or at least legitimized actions aimed at rendering the Sisterhood silent. Any group members seen actually hanging posters or engaging in other forms of activism (or even persons who might have been perceived to be doing so) were thus potential targets for some type of retaliation.

Given that subjectivity is grounded in and in turn rearticulates self-renunciation and obedience, it can generate neither *parrhēsia* as Foucault presents it nor contemporary speech that possesses similar characteristics and produces similar effects. Yet in some ways the Garneau Sisterhood may seem to assert women as subjects. Their posters refer to women as “survivors,” an identity that, I have argued, is implicated in keeping central to a woman’s self-relation, and thus continually reasserting, the violation that sexual violence perpetrates. Moreover, the very notion of a “Sisterhood” seems to reintroduce the idea of a monolithic category “woman” that feminist scholarship has thoroughly problematized. My view, however, is that the Garneau Sisterhood does not invoke either category—“survivor” or “woman”—uncritically.

The anonymity of the Sisterhood is especially instructive in this regard. While anonymity might be considered to undermine the effectiveness of political activism, the lack of a pre-given, identifiable entity to which the Sisterhood’s activities can be tied in fact reflects and in turn fosters the uncertain, impermanent, and dynamic character of a disobedient self-relation. The Sisterhood’s membership, its overall structure, and its character, will vary; ultimately, its composition is unknown. As such, the way in which the Sisterhood and its individual members constitute, relate to, and understand themselves will also vary accordingly. This impermanent, open, and dynamic self-relation is in turn rearticulated through the Sister-

⁵⁰ Gelinas, “Southside sex attack makes four.”

hood's public speech and action such that its very assertion of itself destabilizes norms—of femininity and gendered power relations, but also of normative views about collective political action and feminism itself. Through the freedom and risk that give rise to and are in turn rearticulated through its activism, the Sisterhood destabilizes traditional gendered ways of characterizing and thus responding to rape and sexual assault, and thereby unsettles the subject “women.” Such destabilization and unsettling in turn decenters the harm of sexual violence by refusing to constitute women, and thereby requiring them to constitute themselves, in terms of that harm—either as victims or as survivors. So conceived, the relationship of the Sisterhood to itself, to feminism, and to women is not unlike the relationship of the self to itself which, according to Foucault, unfolds within Hellenistic and Roman self-constitution. In his 1982 Collège course, Foucault describes these historical modes of constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself as facilitating a “presence of self to self” only through a simultaneous “distan[cing] of self from self.”⁵¹ In this type of self-relation one encounters and comes into proximity with oneself precisely within a space of being distanced from oneself. Put differently, becoming who one is (which is an ongoing process) involves adopting a critical perspective relative to one's own self-understanding.

Conclusion

The Garneau Sisterhood's anti-sexual violence activism was effective in part because, as I have just shown, the group refused to accept prevailing conceptualizations of and attitudes toward sexual violence against women, and elucidated the harm generated by such conceptualizations and attitudes, as well as their uncritical acceptance. From outside, without the protection of, and in opposition to normalizing social institutions, the Sisterhood risked not only telling the truth, but also exposing and resisting its suppression. The Sisterhood's activism, however, goes even further, and for that reason it can be considered to function as a particular manifestation of and in turn promote the practice of freedom as Foucault understands it: in addition to refusal and curiosity, the Garneau Sisterhood's activism also reflects and fosters innovation.

Much of what the Sisterhood did may appear to have been previously “thought or imagined.” How unusual or unthinkable is it that an anonymous group of people would employ a poster campaign to protest crime occurring in its neighborhood, criticize the police for inaction, and direct individuals to a website where they can both receive and provide information about said crime? Moreover, the content of the Sisterhood's speech is familiar, employed by feminists and other political activists. Yet in all of its apparent ordinariness, the Sisterhood made some people nervous. And it is precisely in this effect that the innovative nature of their actions becomes apparent.

The Garneau Sisterhood's speech was neither simply appropriated by prevailing institutions nor effectively marginalized and thereby dismissed. The Sisterhood's activism thus reflects a way of navigating existing relations of power that did not obediently rearticulate those relations. Instead, it loosened the connection between, on the one hand, the increased capacities that are both reflected in and facilitated by disobeyingly speaking the truth and, on the other, the circumscribed means for exercising those capacities. The Sisterhood both repre-

⁵¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 223.

sented and created a space for something new, for something that could not be anticipated. And that was enough—enough to disrupt, to unsettle and hence to create opportunities, to make possible.

I think this is part of what Foucault is trying to get us to see: the potential of seemingly mundane actions to provoke. He also makes clear that this reality is simultaneously discouraging and heartening: it illustrates not only that the effects of normalization are extensive, but that insofar as this is the case what has not been thought or imagined is equally so. And yet Foucault's work also allows us to see that the activism of the Sisterhood is perhaps not quite as mundane as it may first appear. It was activism performed by a group that was perceived to be or in fact was composed primarily if not exclusively of women who spoke out publicly, critically, and assertively to protest and counter sexual violence against women and exposed the failures of traditional mechanisms for addressing such violence. That such speech by women continues to be met with shock and discomfort, that it can function to unsettle and serve an anti-normalizing function, is, again, a source of both discouragement and cheer. It shows us as feminists just how much work there is to be done, but it also shows us that there are multiple opportunities for carrying out that work and provides us with valuable tools for doing so.

At the same time that he characterized contemporary efforts to "constitute an ethic of the self" as "almost totally" devoid "of meaning," Foucault nonetheless insisted that attending to the relation of the self to itself was an "urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task" because "the relationship one has to oneself" might be the only "point of resistance to political power."⁵² Foucault's analyses of confessional and parrhesiastic modes of constituting, relating to, and understanding ourselves reveal an interconnection between our self- and world-relations—between, in other words, ethics and politics. Cultivating self-renunciation and obedience relative to ourselves gives us lots of practice in subjugating ourselves to the powers that be as we act in the world, while cultivating disobedience exercises and hones our critical and creative capacities relative to what we are told we are and how the world must be. Acknowledging that we can be other than what we currently are and practicing doing exactly that therefore does not undermine but rather facilitates our ability to publicly, critically, and repeatedly resist; to disrupt and unsettle; and thus to make possible.

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⁵² Ibid, 252.