

6

What do women want? Feminist epistemology and psychoanalytic theory

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All she ever wanted was a little credit ...

Confessions of A Shopaholic (2009)

What do women want today? In the romantic comedy *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, the heroine Rebecca Bloomwood ‘nurtures her shopping addiction and falls for a wealthy entrepreneur’, Luke Brandon.¹ By the end of the film, Rebecca discovers that her desire for Brandon and romance replaces her ‘lust for things you never even knew you needed’ (*Confessions*, 2009). Despite critical reviews, the film made over US \$108 million gross in international markets.² The film was adapted from the immensely successful ‘shopaholic’ book series by the British author Sophie Kinsella. As the marketing materials describe, these books offer stories of ‘shopping and life’. The series follows their heroine from her first compulsive purchases of rugs, underwear and wine to the birth of her daughter, her ‘shopping friend for life’.³ Disney has optioned the books for further film sequels. *Confessions* is part of a new genre of ‘neo-feminist cinema’ in which the question of what women want is central to the filmic narrative (Radner, 2011). It tells a story of feminine consumption, desire, and empowerment.

This chapter explores how ‘what women want’ is still a key political question for third wave feminisms. It asks how an engagement with feminist theories of knowledge and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity might offer new approaches to this political problem. It begins by examining how contemporary feminist thought still confronts ‘femininity’ and its discontents. It then explores how feminist theories of knowledge have built different frameworks to consider new answers to this question. In this field of feminist research, which is known as ‘feminist epistemology’, the politics of subjectivity intersect with the politics of knowledge. The chapter examines key positions within this field and identifies how knowing and identity remain central problems for feminist epistemologies. The chapter then examines why feminists have worked with (and against) psychoanalysis in their attempt to address this problem. Finally, the chapter sets out a post-Lacanian feminist epistemology which makes the problem of knowing and being central to feminist knowledges. It shows how this approach can provide the conceptual building blocks for ‘third wave feminist epistemologies’ (Campbell, 2004b) that offer new ways of thinking through feminist politics of sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge.

What do women want? New sexual contracts in new times

The first scene of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* opens with a shot of the glittering shoes that the little girl Rebecca could not have. It closes with the adult Rebecca’s delighted description of a Gucci bag she came to possess. Rebecca describes this phantasy scene as a ‘dreamy world full of perfect things, where grown up girls got what they wanted’. This *mise-en-scène* of contemporary femininity exemplifies what Angela McRobbie describes as the ‘new sexual contract’ (McRobbie, 2009: 54). For McRobbie, this new sexual contract displaces an older story of modern social belonging. This older story was first told by early European political theorists to explain the agreement of men to

enter into modern political society, where all equally possess rights and agree to civil obligations. Carole Pateman argues that this social contract was in fact a fraternal pact that organized relationships between men. This pact was supported by the ‘sexual contract’, which ordered modern relations between men and women. In this social order ‘women are subordinated to men as men, or to men as a fraternity. The original contract takes place after the political defeat of the father and creates modern fraternal patriarchy’ (Pateman, 1998: 3).

Now, however, it seems that a new sexual contract is emerging in the context of new globalizing post-Fordist and neo-liberal capitalism (see Fraser, 2009; Oksala, 2011). Taking the British context as an example, it is possible to see how this ‘new sexual contract appears to displace traditional modes of patriarchal authority and attribute to young women all manner of social, political, and economic freedoms’ (Adkins, 2008: 191). Under the terms of this new contract women will use their freedoms to enter this new world of capitalist consumption. In return, women are promised that they can ‘have it all’ (Day, 2010). Nina Power sharply observes of such images of contemporary womanhood: ‘[t]o Freud’s infamous question “what do women want?” it seems, then, that we have all-too-ready an answer. Why! They want shoes and chocolate and handbags and babies and curling tongs washed down with a large glass of white wine’ (Power 2009: 30). For younger women such as Rebecca this new sexual contract promises economic freedom through the consumption of shoes and handbags. For older ‘grown up’ women, it promises husbands and babies (just as its earlier form did). For both generations, it offers what Nancy Fraser describes as ‘a new romance of female advancement and gender justice’ (Fraser, 2009: 110).

On closer examination, it increasingly appears that the terms of this sexual contract are too costly, and that grown-up women do not really get what they want. These promises of ‘family’ life and economic participation seem increasingly undesirable or unbelievable. McRobbie identifies the physical and psychic pain of normative sexuality as the cost of entering the new sexual contract for younger women (McRobbie, 2009: 54). As they grow up, nearly half of all British women never marry, and significantly decreasing numbers live in nuclear families (Office for National Statistics, 2012a). They earn lower wages, and have less political power, than their male counterparts in a changing – but still gendered – society. These British trends are typical of industrialized Europe and North America and are now also emerging in the industrializing Asian and Latin American economies (UN Women, 2012). We now see the emergence of new problematics of desire, sexuality and ‘femininity’ in the differentiated forms of late capitalist consumption and neo-liberal politics currently evolving from London to Beijing.

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that another late capitalist story of failed romance has also appeared. These are stories of apolitical and indifferent young women, of apathetic and exhausted post-feminists or of ‘feminist killjoys’ who simply cannot be happy (Ahmed, 2010). In this narrative ‘the best tip for women wanting to have it all is: don’t bother’ (Marin, 2010). However, none of these stories challenges the remaking of femininities and their discontents in these new times or offers alternative visions of the ‘all’ that women want. Rather, they are intensified ‘backlash’ narratives against legal and social gains by women that first emerged in the 1980s against second wave feminism (Faludi, 2006). For this reason, as McRobbie describes, the vital question in this post-feminist context is “‘what now?’” (McRobbie, 2009: 21).

Contemporary feminist theory insists that ‘gender trouble’ is central to these global transformations, even if it is neglected in dominant approaches to thinking about these changes (Yuval-Davis, 2009). The challenge remains to gain a better understanding of the gendering of these social transformations. It remains necessary to reinvent feminist politics for this gendered present and to rearticulate feminist demands in terms that might answer the question of what women want in terms that are less costly and more liberatory. Meeting these challenges rests upon developing new feminist knowledges that can invent new methods to investigate and build better cognitive maps of this ‘neo-liberal, fragmented, dislocated, experiential reality’ (Mirza, 2009). This epistemological potential rests upon the possibility that feminist theory and practice can operate as potentially transformative knowledges that change how we know our social world. To engage with the political question of what women want now, it is also therefore necessary to engage with the epistemological question of how we know ourselves and our others in these ‘new times’ (Mirza, 2009). In these engagements, the politics of subjectivity intersect with the politics of knowledge, and understanding how they intersect is a crucial problem for third wave feminist epistemologies.

The field of feminist epistemologies

What *is* ‘feminist epistemology’? This term now refers to a diverse and interdisciplinary field of research on feminist theories of knowledge. However, when this term was first used in North American and European scholarship in the 1980s it did not refer to a recognizable body of work. Rather, it referred to a set of theoretical and political problems concerning accounts of knowledge. These initially focused upon the question of whether there are ‘distinctive feminist perspectives on epistemology, metaphysics, methodology and philosophy of science’ (Harding and Hintikka, 1983: ix).

These early feminist epistemologies developed two key deconstructive critiques of ‘sexist’ and ‘masculinist’ knowledges (Alcoff and Potter, 1993: 2). The first critique engaged with the models and practices of science that inform the natural and social sciences, arguing that these are gendered. This approach argued the issue is not simply that illegitimate social values influence scientific research, but more problematically that those values form part of the research process itself (Fox Keller and Longino, 1996). The ideas and practices of scientific knowledge reflect the gendered and unequal social world from which ‘science’ emerges. The second critique engages with the ideas of knower and knowing that inform European epistemological models more generally. In this argument, knowledges presume a masculine subject whose dominating, instrumental and objectifying relation to what is known derives from cultural models of masculinity (Scheman, 1987; Lloyd, 1984).

However, the aim of this work was not to simply provide a ‘better’ account of epistemology but rather to explain the difference that feminist politics can make to how we know the world. This issue of the politics of knowledge (and in particular the politics of feminist knowledge) has been central to feminist theorizing from its second wave development in the 1970s (whether in the North American tradition of the Combahee River Collective or the European tradition of Luce Irigaray). This engagement with feminist epistemic practices identifies the emergence of feminist epistemology as a distinctive field of study. It marks the move from an emphasis upon deconstructive epistemological projects that aim to expose sexist bias and masculinist knowledges to reconstructive projects that aim to provide new models of feminist knowing in order to reconstruct epistemic practices as feminist practices. Because power relations shape how we know the world, this more recent project of feminist epistemology aims to

construct new models of knowing the social world so that it becomes possible to understand that world differently.

Two important characteristics of the field emerge with this reconstructive project. The first is an unpacking of ‘the ontological and epistemological category of Woman as well as the lived experiences and social positions of women’ (Ali, 2007: 195). With this increasing emphasis upon intersecting relations of power that produce knowledge, there is also a concomitant development of ideas of ‘oppositional’ or ‘intersectional’ epistemologies that aim to provide theories of knowledge that can capture and critique social and global inequalities (Sandoval, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2012). The second characteristic flows from the increasing focus upon feminist knowledges as the object of study for the field. With this focus, the field begins to develop as an interdisciplinary area of research that moves from its narrower philosophical concerns to engage with the many disciplines that feminist theory draws upon, ranging from sociology to legal theory.

This interdisciplinary, methodologically pluralistic and politically diverse field of feminist theory can be delineated by (1) its object of study, (2) its project or collective aims, and (3) its set of common political and theoretical positions. These theories share a common focus upon feminist theory and practice as their object of study. The shared aim of those engaged in this complex and changing field is to examine how feminisms can produce transformative knowledges that change our understanding of our social world. This diverse body of work links the production of knowledge to the transformative values of feminist movements and examines how these values can produce new models of epistemic practice. It considers how feminist theory and practice can operate as more persuasive and political accounts of our social world.

Epistemology is traditionally conceived as those necessary and sufficient truth-conditions for propositional knowledge. By contrast, the field of feminist epistemology analyses the social and political construction of knowledge, including feminist knowledges. Gayatri Spivak (1989) helpfully describes this analysis as linking problems of ontology (theory of being), epistemology (theory of knowledge) and axiology (theory of value). Feminist epistemologies seek to make explicit these models of the subject (ontology), knowing (epistemology) and politics (axiology) that inform our truth-claims. This approach challenges us to ask: What *is* the female/feminine subject? How *do* we know what these subjects want? And what *are* the politics of these desires? However, it also raises three key conceptual problems. The first is how to make explicit the models of the person, politics and knowing that inform our accounts of the world. The second is how to understand the social and political construction of knowledge, including feminist knowledges. The third problem is how to construct new feminist models of knowing. All three problems shape current research in the field, but it is the second and third problems that have come to dominate contemporary research.

Two key groups of arguments have emerged in debates around these problems. The first set of arguments focuses upon how to understand the formation of feminist knowledge in its social and political context while also offering a critical perspective on that context rather than simply reflecting its values. These theories examine how the distinctive nature of feminist knowledge can emerge from our given social and political orders. Particularly influential examples of this approach are the standpoint theories of Hartsock (1983) and Harding (1991), as well as Haraway (1991) on situated knowledges. This work focuses upon theorizing feminist knowledge as ‘a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in inhomogeneous gendered social space’ (Haraway, 1991: 195). Hartsock and Harding offer an experiential standpoint argument

that contends that social groups are located differently in relations of domination, and that these groups' different experiences of oppression will produce different knowledges of the social world. To rebuild these as critical knowledges requires beginning from the standpoint of oppressed and marginalized groups (see hooks, 2003; Collins, 2003). Haraway outlines an argument for political standpoint, and suggests that feminist critical visions of the world are built through coalitional politics. For Haraway, this standpoint needs to be developed from political work and coalition building (see Campbell, 2004a).

The second key group of arguments seeks to analyse the epistemic practices that produce feminist knowledges. One approach engages with epistemic norms that we use to evaluate truth claims, such as models of rationality and objectivity. They reconceive reasoning as a connective and critical process. They also reconfigure objectivity as acknowledging the situatedness of truth-claims and accepting responsibility to communities of knowers and political values (Longino 2010). Another approach engages with the relationship between knowing subjects and the production of knowledge, arguing that there is an important connection between the production of feminist knowledge and the knowing subject. They offer different ways to think about the knowing subject that move past traditional assumptions of the knower as an autonomous and disembodied individual. This approach instead considers the knower as an embodied female or feminist subject (see Irigaray, 1985a; Braidotti, 1992) or as collective groups of feminist knowers, such as the idea of epistemic community in the work of Longino (2002) or Code (1995). More recently, this knowing subject has been reconceived through the so-called 'new feminist materialisms' (Tuin, 2011). These theories return feminist epistemological thought to the problem of how to theorize materiality and subjectivity. This problem ranges from how to understand the physical

embodiment of the biological subject to how to extend epistemological analysis to include the material physical world, such that it includes non-human things and objects as well as humans as epistemological agents (for example, see Tuin, 2009; Withers 2010). This ‘materialist’ turn thereby returns feminist epistemologies to many of the earliest engagements of the field with philosophical questions concerning ‘metaphysics, methodology and philosophy of science’ (Harding and Hintikka, 1993: ix).

The relationship between feminist theories of knowing and being remains a central problem within the field of feminist epistemology (Hemmings, 2012). Tuin (2009) invites us to develop ‘third wave feminist epistemologies’ to engage with this problem, arguing that the ‘new materialisms’ provide a novel approach to theorizing sexual difference, and hence a means of ‘jumping generations’ of the impasses of second wave epistemological thinking. However, Hemmings (2009) suggests that Tuin’s approach does not imagine a different relation to the new epistemological problems opened up, and explored, by second wave theory. In contrast, she argues that Tuin’s analysis reproduces the Oedipal narratives of generations of thinkers that she seeks to escape. This exchange is part of a larger contemporary debate concerning the periodization of ‘waves’ or ‘generations’ of feminist thought and politics that contrasts second wave feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s to the third wave of the 1990s and onwards (Snyder, 2008). However, a more productive strategy to address these ‘generational dilemmas’, as Hemmings calls them, is to resist Tuin’s emphasis upon ‘qualitative generational change’ in feminist epistemology (2009: 18). Instead, my approach seeks to build upon the shared acknowledgement of both Hemmings and Tuin that ‘third wave feminist epistemology’ names an important and continuing problematic within feminist theory, rather than providing a final answer to the question of feminist epistemologies.

I first developed the notion of ‘third wave feminist epistemologies’ in my earlier work to name a set of emerging problems for theories of feminist knowledge (Campbell, 2004b; Tuin, 2010). This term did not indicate a fixed referent, such as specific thinkers or traditions, or even a particular theoretical taxonomy or framework. Rather, following the insights of feminist epistemologists themselves, I used the term ‘feminist epistemology’ to refer to a field of research that coalesces around a shared set of theoretical and political concerns. The ongoing productivity of the field of feminist epistemology (like the theory and politics from which it derives) lies in the diversity and hybridity of the feminist knowledges that form its object of study and in the plural and dialogical nature of the accounts of those knowledges. The disagreements and negotiations concerning feminist knowledge as an object of enquiry, and the different accounts of that object, produce feminist epistemology as a collective field of enquiry. Accordingly, my conception of ‘third wave feminist epistemologies’ refers to a collective set of conceptual knots and issues that coalesce around a shared set of theoretical and political concerns.

Following this approach, the dialogue between Tuin and Hemmings itself represents an important, productive exchange within this field. This exchange points to a foundational and persevering theoretical problem in the field: how to understand the production of the feminist knower and feminist epistemic practices. How, then, to reconsider these conceptual knots and issues? In her early description of this central problem of feminist thought Spivak identifies feminist readings of psychoanalysis as offering an important ‘epistemological itinerary’ (1989: 209). If this relationship between feminist knowing subjects and knowledges remains a central problem for third wave feminist epistemologies, then feminists might again reconsider rereading

psychoanalysis for its epistemological itinerary, which offers another useful account of knowing and being.

Feminisms and psychoanalysis

Early last century, Freud wrote to the French psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte that ‘the great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is “What does a woman want?”’ (Freud, 1955: 468). It seems that in our current times Freud’s ‘great question’ remains unanswered, and the problem of ‘femininity’ remains as pressing as ever. Spivak’s earlier interlocutor Jacqueline Rose argues that psychoanalysis still:

needs to be brought back into the frame as part of feminist language ... Psychoanalysis can help us understand how public phantasies work, why they’re so powerful and why they can be so ugly, and still be so attractive and so persistent. There’s no discourse in the culture for understanding the unconscious force of that, except for psychoanalysis. (Mitchell et al, 2010: 79)

What women want is central to the self-description of third wave feminisms, and femininity, sexuality and desire have become highly contentious issues within third wave politics (Snyder, 2008). In the context of contemporary ‘gender troubles’, psychoanalysis again becomes an important site of engagement. Psychoanalysis can help to understand the individual and collective effects of sexed subjectivity, as well as the power of contemporary phantasies of femininity. As Juliet Mitchell’s classic argument cautions, ‘psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it’ (Mitchell, 1974: xiii). For feminism and psychoanalysis, sexual difference makes a difference to both becoming

subjects and knowing the world. It is here that the politics of subjectivity meets the problem of feminist knowledge, and that feminist epistemologies meet psychoanalysis. This intersecting problematic means that it is possible for feminist epistemologies to draw upon both the psychoanalytic insight that sexual identity is contingent and impossible as well as the feminist insight that sexual identity is contingently tied to empirical social subjects and relations.

However, there has been a long and complex relationship between different feminist and psychoanalytic traditions. The intersections between these fields change as feminist and psychoanalytic theories and politics shift, with the relationships between feminism and psychoanalysis taking different forms at different times. However, one of the most influential strands of psychoanalytic thinking for contemporary feminist theory has been the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The influence of Lacanian theory has extended beyond practising psychoanalysts to shape an influential generation of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who have become central to feminist thought. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the leading contemporary theorist of gender, Judith Butler, has consistently engaged with Lacanian psychoanalysis from *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) to her most recent discussion of sexual difference and kinship (Butler, 2012).

Feminist theory has predominantly read Lacanian theory as (and for) an account of the constitution of 'sexual subjectivity': that is, how we come to understand ourselves as 'masculine' and 'feminine' persons. Feminists such as Jacqueline Rose have argued that Lacan's work is useful because it understands sexual identity as problematic and sexual difference as contingent. For Rose, Lacan's work offers a cultural, rather than biological, account of sexual difference. This approach is important because it explains

sexual difference not as a biological given but rather as a symbolization of the body that represents subjects as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. It recognizes that sexual difference is integral to the formation and experience of subjectivity. However, it also reveals the 'problematic, if not impossible, nature of sexual identity' (Rose, 1982: 28). According to this psychoanalytic model, there is only a contingent relation between sexual bodies and identities. Since the unconscious reveals the failure of all identity, sexual identity is necessarily unstable, incomplete and lacking, which never quite maps onto our bodies or selves (Rose, 1986: 90). In this account, while both masculinity and femininity are never fully achieved or stable, 'femininity' is a particularly problematic subject position. This is because the socio-symbolic order that appears to create sexual difference is in actuality structured around the 'masculine' term.

However, Lacan's account of masculinity and femininity has also given rise to contentious debates concerning feminist appropriations of his work. The key accusation of 'phallogentrism' centres on two main objections. The first is that Lacan ties his concept of the phallus, the symbolic element that marks the subject as named by language, to the penis, the physical organ of the male body. Second, by doing so, Lacan privileges masculinity and the male body as his model of sexual difference and its formation. For example, Nancy Fraser contends that Lacan's account is irrevocably phallogentric, with the consequence that feminism should not 'use or adapt the theory of Jacques Lacan' because its structuralist determinism naturalizes women's oppression (Fraser, 1992: 182). Butler (2012) returns to this problem of the seemingly unchangeable symbolic order in her most recent critical engagement with feminist Lacanian theory.

However, another strand of feminist work undertakes a post-Lacanian project of challenging the symbolic structures of the existing social order. An important example of this can be found in the work of Luce Irigaray. Whitford summarizes her project as the construction of ‘a female sociality (*les femmes entre elles*), a female symbolic and female social contract, a horizontal relation *between* women’ (Whitford, 1991: 79). Irigaray calls for a horizontal relation between women because she argues that the Symbolic order represents a horizontal relation between men and forms a society and culture ‘between-men’ to the exclusion of women. Irigaray proposes two key strategies for a rewriting of the Symbolic order. The first deconstructs masculinist philosophical discourse as the master discourse of modern Western culture. For example, this strategy is pursued in her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray, 1985a). The second strategy is a reconstructive project that calls for the creation of new ways of imagining and representing what it is to be a woman. An important example of this project in Irigaray’s work is her creation of different representations of the female body, such as the ‘two-lips’ metaphor of *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Irigaray, 1985b). Building on this strategy, Irigaray has drawn up a civil code of ‘positive rights of citizenship in the female mode’ with the aim of producing a new civic identity for women by (Irigaray, 1994: 38). Against a conservative reading of Lacan’s work that holds that the Symbolic order is the only possible symbolic structure, Irigaray offers the possibility of a different symbolic order in her suggestion that women should create a new language and social contract that are appropriate for them. This strategy considers both the difficulties for women of the ‘feminine’ role that the ‘masculine’ defines, as well as the problem of how to reconceive ‘femininity’ in other terms (Ferrell, 1996).

This Lacanian argument concerning the failure of identity, and its structuring socio-symbolic order, has also been taken up by post-colonial feminist and queer theorists.

These theorists engage with the Lacanian account of subjectivity, but argue that his insights are helpful in understanding the making not only of ‘sexual’ difference but also of ‘racial’ difference. In this reading of Lacan, ‘racial’ identity is neither completely ‘successful’ nor successfully ‘complete’. Kobena Mercer’s post-colonial and queer adaption of Jacqueline Rose’s Lacanian feminism exemplifies this understanding of identity, where:

[w]hat distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of black masculinity ... is that whereas for the latter, the internalisation of norms is roughly assumed to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point for psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the ‘failure’ of identity ... Black people’s affinity with psychoanalysis rests above all ... with this recognition that there is a resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life. (Mercer, 1994: 170)

This account conceives ethnic and sexual identity neither as originary nor as essential. Rather, it emphasizes how complex psychic processes of identification and disidentification form ‘racial’ and ‘sexual’ post-colonial ethnicities.

There has been considerable debate concerning the utility of Lacanian psychoanalysis for feminist post-colonial theory, which primarily concerns its ‘often intractable claims of universality [and] its desire to privilege sexual difference over other forms of difference’ (Seshadri-Crooks, 1998: 354). This critique contends that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a universalizing and ahistorical theory that fails to acknowledge its own historical and political specificity as a modern European philosophy (see McClintock, 1995). However, Seshadri-Crooks also suggests that a possible strategy is to ‘evolve a procedure that does not require an analogy between sex and race ... to discover the intricate structural relations between race and sex, to see how race articulates itself with sex to gain access to desire or lack – the paradoxical

guarantee of the subject's sovereignty beyond symbolic determination' (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000: 3). For example, she uses Lacanian theory to engage in a careful reading of cultural texts of 'race' to work through those phantasies that guarantee the sovereignty of the racial subject, so as 'to resist the specious enjoyment promised by Whiteness' (2000: 160). Other now classic examples of this feminist post-colonial approach include those of Jan Campbell (2000) and Ranjana Khanna (2003).

An important element of this strategy is to use Lacanian psychoanalysis to shift the focus of post-colonial studies from 'the elaboration of the psychic mutabilities of the post-colonial subject alone' to consider the subject in context of the constitution of communities and collectivities as such (Chow, 1999: 34–5). Rey Chow's important work in this area shows the usefulness of Lacanian psychoanalysis for exploring 'the structural problems of community formation that are always implied in the articulation of the subject [and to address] issues of structural control – of law, sovereignty, and prohibition – that underlie the subject's relation with the collective' (Chow, 1999: 35, see also Bowman, 2010). This engagement with the relation between subject and collective involves a reconsideration of the socio-symbolic order as a social order. Like Irigaray, Chow proposes a post-Lacanian project which analyses and challenges the existing social order that structures subjectivity in terms of racial and sexual difference.

These feminist theories share the use of Lacanian theory to understand the formation of sexuated and racialized subjects in the socio-symbolic order and the structuring of that order through the representation of sexual and racial 'difference'. They also use it to understand the failure of those identities and the incompleteness of the socio-symbolic order that produces such subjective differences. These post-Lacanian feminist strategies reveal another way of understanding how we come to know ourselves as

gendered and racialized subjects. For this reason, the productive appropriations of Lacanian psychoanalysis suggest another approach to reworking the ‘generational dilemma’ of feminist epistemology, in that they envisage another reconfiguration of the relation between epistemology and ontology, and hence of knowing our selves and our others otherwise.

Feminist discourses

Women cannot be self-assured without language and systems of representations being transformed, because these are appropriate to men’s subjectivity, they are reassuring to the between-men culture. (Irigaray, 1990: 96)

How *does* feminist knowledge offer critical knowledges of our selves and our others that can contest and change the existing social order? If feminist epistemologies recognize the social construction of knowledge, then how can feminist knowledges escape that construction? This problem can be seen as a variant of a classical problem of the sociology of knowledge. This is the problem of how the sociologist can claim to describe the ‘truth’ of the social world, when they exist in that society and hence do not have a position that transcends social relations and values. Ultimately, this question founds the reconstructive project of feminist epistemology, which asks how feminist knowledge can effect an epistemological break that produces new ways to know the world. As Irigaray describes it, this break with previous epistemological models requires the transformation of ‘language and systems of representation’ (Irigaray, 1990: 96). This transformation of the socio-symbolic order is crucial, because it structures subjects and their desires. It involves building another epistemological frame to think differently about desiring subjects and their relations to others.

Lacanian discourse

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers feminist epistemology an important account of the formation of the subject and knowledge in the field of sexuality. From his earliest work, Lacan emphasizes that ‘the structures of society are symbolic’ (Lacan, 2006: 108). For Lacan, language produces the subject and its relations to others. Reworking de Saussure’s account of the structure of language and of Lévi-Strauss’s structure of culture, Lacan argues that meaning emerges from a differential relationship between symbolic elements, or signifiers. These signifiers exist in a structural relationship to each other – the symbolic order – that symbolizes or represents a social order.

As a socio-symbolic order, language has three registers (for further discussion, see Campbell, 2004b). The imaginary register is the aspect of the socio-symbolic order that involves the image, imagination and phantasy. These are the ‘images of social place’ and self through which we imagine our relation to the order of representation, or, in Lacanian terms, the symbolic. The symbolic is the structuring order of linguistic elements, which the imaginary fills with phantasmic content. In *Confessions*, Rebecca imagines herself as ‘the girl in the green scarf’, a girl with bigger eyes, a more expensive haircut, more poise and more confidence. This is an imaginary scene, in which Rebecca pictures herself as a beautiful woman who is confident in her relations to others.

The symbolic is the order of cultural exchange, which is structured by the paternal law prohibiting certain kinship relations and permitting others. Crucially, for Lacan, this signifying order rests upon a social order of symbolic and sexual exchange. This socio-symbolic order constitutes subjectivity and intersubjectivity in particular forms. This sexuuated order structures subjectivity in relation to the phallus, the signifier of sexual difference (Lacan, 2006). For Lacan, the subject is sexuuated and the social is

structured by sexual difference. In Lacanian terms, sexual difference is structured in relation to the phallus, the mark of the loss of bodily enjoyment all subjects give up on entering the social world. The phallic function is ‘*the function that institutes lack*, that is, the alienating function of language’ (Fink, 1995: 103). However, the symbolic structures feminine and masculine subjects (which can be either men or women) in terms of a different relation to this loss, such that the masculine is presumed to be complete and whole, while the feminine is presumed to be incomplete and lacking. So, for example, in *Confessions*, Rebecca believes her self to be incomplete until she meets Brandon, the man she believes will satisfy her desires.

However, the symbolic is also necessarily an incomplete structure, because it will always be missing a symbolic element that could complete it. Accordingly, as a signifying order, any system of representation is always incomplete. This ‘gap’ or ‘lack’ in the symbolic order is the real. This is the third register of language. The real is that which cannot be represented in the socio-symbolic order because there is no signifier that can represent it. It is at this point of the failure of the symbolic that phantasy comes into operation. In the psychoanalytic sense, phantasy is an ‘[i]maginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish ... in a manner which is distorted ... by defensive processes’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 314). For Lacan, ‘phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary’, the lack or gap in the symbolic order (Lacan, 1986: 60). This concealing operation of phantasy can be seen in *Confessions*, in which the question of what women want is answered with the phantasy man, whose presence masks Rebecca’s other unrepresentable desires.

This account of language and subjectivity can be described as the ‘classical’ Lacan of his key text, *Écrits*. However, Lacan (1998; 2007) subsequently reworked this account in his later theory of the social bond of discourse. In this important reformulation, he described four social ties or ‘discourses’ of psychoanalytic experience in the later seminars of the 1960s and 1970s. For the later Lacan, discourse is a chain of symbolic elements, or signifiers. Discourse produces the social link between subjects because discursive chains of signifiers structure stable intersubjective relations. The Lacanian concept of discourse links the structure of signification and the intersubjective relation because it describes signifying chains that form relations between subjects. This is not an idea of ‘discourse’ in the Foucauldian sense of an epistemological and political system of statements. Rather, discourse is a linguistic relationship, in the sense that stable structures of symbolic elements shape our relation to our selves and our others. This approach emphasizes the intersubjective aspect of discourse, in which language functions as the link between speaking subjects. In the Lacanian sense, discourse is ‘a social link (*lien social*), founded on language’ (1998: 30).

For Lacan, discourse is a ‘fundamental relationship, resulting in a particular *social bond*’ (Verhaeghe, 1997: 100). It consists of a chain of symbolic elements that function as the social link because they symbolize certain forms of relationships between subjects. The social bond consists of these chains of symbolic elements, which signify the relation of one subject to another. This social bond of discourse knots together words and concepts, enabling the circulation of symbolic elements between speaking subjects. This discursive link fixes meaning, in the sense that it becomes possible to exchange stable meaning between speaking subjects. The concept of discourse thus

links signification and intersubjectivity. The signifying chain that forms relations between subjects derives from the transindividual and sexuated order of language.

In the later Lacanian epistemology, 'knowledge' is not only a relation of subject to object but also, critically, a relation of subject to subject. Lacan argues that discourses represent different forms of the social bond. The discourses that produce different forms of intersubjectivity also produce different forms of knowledge. In this way, the later Lacanian account of knowledge moves between subjective and intersubjective structures. Because Lacan's model describes not only the relation of subject to object but also the relation of subjects, discourses of knowledge reveal the relation of the knower to its others. The Lacanian model thereby unfolds the epistemological relation of knowing subject, signifier and known object to include the relation of the knowing subject to other subjects. The later Lacanian epistemology is a model of knowledge as *social*, in the sense that it is the product of the discursive link between subjects.

For Lacan, the dominant modern discursive link is the Discourse of the Master. This discourse produces mastering knowledges, which he identifies as those of the University and of science (Lacan, 2007: 147). Like the deconstructive feminist epistemological theories, Lacan identifies science and university discourses as producing forms of knowing that seek to dominate and control their objects. However, these modern discourses of knowledge operate within the field of sexual difference. If the dominant discourse of modernity is that of the Master, this Master is a masculine subject that exists in fraternal relations to other masculine subjects (Campbell, 2004b). As feminist thinkers such as Pateman and Irigaray have shown, the modern social contract is a sexuate contract, which presumes fraternal relations between masculine subjects as social subjects and feminine subjects as objects of exchange between them.

As a fraternal social bond, the modern Discourse of the Master produces ‘masculine’ forms of knowledges and knowing subjects. How, then, might feminist knowledges create other ways of knowing and being?

From Lacanian to feminist discourse

To rewrite the modern fraternal discourses of subjectivity and sociality requires a transformation of these fraternal models of knowledge. This is the aim of the contemporary reconstructive project of feminist epistemology. Braidotti points out new forms of feminist knowledge ‘imply the transformation of the very structures and images of thought, not just the propositional content of the thoughts’ (Braidotti, 1992: 184). For Braidotti, developing feminist epistemologies involves not just discovering new ideas (that is, new content) but also creating new ways of understanding the world (that is, new epistemologies). To use Lacanian epistemology to undertake such a reconstructive project involves reconfiguring it through feminist politics and social theory, since the feminist knowledges are both political and social. This reframes the focus of our epistemological investigation from Lacanian discourse to feminist discourse.

The feminist idea that it is possible to transform systems of thought and representation begins with the possibility that the existing socio-symbolic order does not know (or represent) subjects or objects. For this reason, a useful starting point for the transformation of existing epistemic orders is considering the limits of that order., Accordingly, feminist transformations of existing ways of knowing can begin with the articulation of that which a phallogocentric Symbolic order does not represent. Taking this approach, I begin to develop this psychoanalytic feminist strategy by returning to the phantasies of femininity in *Confessions*. This offers a helpful starting point for an

examination of the ‘system of representation’ of ‘feminine’ (and ‘masculine’) identities and for the identification of the gaps in these discourses of what it is to be a woman (or a man).

In *Confessions*, Rebecca imagines herself as ‘the girl in the green scarf’ – this is the girl with bigger eyes, a more expensive haircut, with better poise and added confidence. The ‘girl in the green scarf’ is a composite image, made up of different signifiers of a particular form of white feminine sexuality – large eyes, luminous skin, glamorous hairstyle, bodily poise, confident presentation and – of course – the green scarf that she will buy to make her into that woman. This is what Angela McRobbie (following Judith Butler and psychoanalyst Joan Riviere) calls ‘post-feminist masquerade as a mode of feminine inscription, across the whole surface of the body’ (McRobbie, 2009: 64). McRobbie suggests that this contemporary form of femininity emerges as a new cultural dominant because of the current challenges to the older forms of patriarchal Symbolic order. She points to an important remaking of femininities in contemporary capitalism, even as it installs the white heterosexual subject as norm. However, the feminine masquerade is now also rearticulating ‘racialized’ femininities from the most recent ‘multi-cultural’ campaigns of Estee Lauder to the all ‘non-white’ models of the Givenchy couture collection (Butler, 2103). Lacanian psychoanalysis helps to reveal how these ideas of femininity (and their masculine counterpart) do not escape from the phallogentric socio-symbolic order. It insists that modern fraternal discourses of the social contract emerge from the collapse of the older paternal law of force and authority. For this reason, these modern discourses can be seen as representing a new form of the phallic order, rather than as superseding it (Campbell, 2004b). As such, they are in actuality modern fraternal discourses of identity, which still structure subjectivity and

sociality in terms of the relations between masculine subjects and a phallic social order that supports them.

These modern discourses can be understood as producing imaginary identities. These identities collapse phantasies of self and the ‘idealizing capital I of identification’ (Lacan, 1986 272). They fill social norms of masculinity and femininity (the ideal) with imaginary content (the phantasies of self). So, for example, Rebecca imagines herself as the woman she would like to be when she buys her green scarf. This is her phantasy of what it is to be a ‘woman’. Following Kaja Silverman (1992), these discourses of identity can be called ‘social fictions’, because they are dominant or hegemonic representations of identity. For example, in the opening scene of *Confessions*, Rebecca composes this normative feminine ‘self’ from and through each clothing purchase. ‘Do what you want, what you want’ is the chorus that opens the scene of Rebecca’s commodity seduction. What lures her into the store is a material object: the green scarf. The scarf is a real object that glimmers with ‘something more’, and it is this ‘something more’ that captures Rebecca’s gaze. The scarf has become a psychic object, an object that does not fulfill ‘real’ or material needs but rather psychic desires. Or, as the mannequin puts it, ‘who needs a scarf? wrap some old jeans around your neck to keep yourself warm ... the point about *this* scarf is that it will become part of a definition of your psyche’. The material object becomes a psychic object through the co-ordinates of Rebecca’s desire: that is, through her wish to be her image of herself as the ‘girl in the green scarf’. In this way, this object supports Rebecca’s deepest attachments to the social fictions of ‘femininity’ circulating in her world of late capitalist consumption.

Social fictions produce an imagined self that we fill with phantasies of who we would like to be and images of who we imagine ourselves to be. This self operates as

an imaginary object filled with phantasmic content (the imaginary *a*), as can be seen the diagram below.

Social fictions: s-s-s-s-**S** identity (imaginary *a*)

These social fictions are composed of signifying elements (the chain of signifiers, or s-s-s-s-s above). One signifier in this chain (the dominant signifier, or **S** above) ‘names’ subjects in this hegemonic order. This is the social norm of femininity, which is made ‘real’ to subjects through their phantasmic attachments to this norm. This making ‘real’ of a signifier involves filling it with the imaginary content of the ‘self’ (‘identity’ in the diagram above). While McRobbie emphasizes masquerade as performance or practice, a Lacanian account emphasizes the deep attachment or ‘unconscious wish’ that ties us to these performances, and the psychic costs and pleasures that come with this feminine phantasy. The performative account assumes that the practices of feminine masquerade make us into ‘feminine’ subjects, whereas Lacanian psychoanalysis assumes that it is our attachment to ideas of ‘femininity’ that give these practices meaning as markers of sexual difference.

However, it is also important to understand that the imaginary *a* of the self ‘stands simultaneously for the imaginary phantasmic lure/screen *and* for that which this lure is obfuscating, for the void behind the lure’ (Zizek, 1998: 80). That ‘void behind the lure’ is the symbolic *a*, understood as that which marks the excluded term of discourse, the gap in (or void of) its symbolic structure. This marks a place of structural impossibility: namely, that point at which the socio-symbolic order is incomplete and lacking.

Social fictions therefore have imaginary and symbolic registers, as can be seen in the second diagram below:

Social fictions: s-s-s-s-s imaginary identity | symbolic *a*

In this diagram, the symbolic *a* marks the gap or lack in the socio-symbolic order that the imaginary identity of ‘femininity’ veils and conceals. In *Confessions*, when Rebecca imagines she is the girl in the green scarf, her phantasy of self covers the gap in this social fiction. In this scene of wish fulfillment, the green scarf will support Rebecca becoming the ‘ideal’ woman, which she is not and cannot ever be. In Lacanian approach, there is no ‘true’ feminine behind the masquerade, for the masquerade of femininity is itself a phantasy that we identify with.

In contrast, feminist discourses traverse these phantasies of identities by insisting that those social discourses found themselves upon a repudiated term. This repudiated other is the *a*, the excluded and necessary term of that discourse. Feminist knowledges link that excluded *a* to women. Social fictions produce the realities of women’s lives and bodies as a discursive category that can only appear as a ‘gap’ or ‘lack’ in these discourses of selves and their others. However, feminist politics permits the recognition of this founding lack or excluded *a* term of social fictions. This recognition of the symbolic *a* of social fictions symbolizes this gap or lack, so that it no longer functions as a term which social discourse excludes. For example, feminist analyses of the phantasy of femininity presented by *Confessions* could point to the exclusion of particular realities of gendered and racialized identity from this phantasy of femininity. These range from the unequal distribution of wealth between women and men (Rebecca is employed by Luke) to the cost of this heteronormative ‘feminine’ identity (Rebecca gives up her financial autonomy to gain a husband) to the apparent exclusion of particular racialized bodies from this ‘new femininity’ (Rebecca lives in a white world). By developing these critiques, feminist discourses can identify the social fictions of gender and the reality of the social experiences of women that those discourses exclude.

Social fictions represent a fictional identity that excludes the complex and specific social experiences of women from their representation of these femininities. An example of this operation can be seen in sexual difference. The operation of social fictions substitutes an imaginary and fictional myth of 'The Woman' for the complexity of women's social experience. Social fictions operate to repudiate that reality, putting in its place certain fictional ways to be a female subject, such as becoming 'the girl in the green scarf' of *Confessions*. Yet, at the same time, this representation does not include Rebecca's actual body, which has physical existence and functions. Like all romantic comedies, *Confessions* ends with romance, not sex. This is not to argue that 'women' do not exist (either as fact or in discourse). Instead, social fictions produce their social experiences as the excluded of discourse, namely as its repudiated *a* term.

This excluded *a* of social fictions is the 'real' of women. Social fictions do not represent the 'reality' of women's experience (an experience of oppression and domination as well as pleasure and desire), but rather provide a representation of living under their reign. That reality takes many forms: bodily, affective, cultural, material and social. Social practices produce that 'reality', which represents the particular social relations experienced by women because they are gendered subjects. This formulation does not indicate that all women have the same social experiences because they are women, but rather that sexuation inflects subjective formation and experience. This experience is discursively produced, since it is 'specifically and materially engendered' in social relations (Lauretis, 1988: 9–10). However, it is also produced by social fictions as a category of social experience that is excluded from the hegemonic order of representation.

Social fictions (and their exclusions) can be traced to the operation of a fraternal phallic socio-symbolic order that produces discourse as discourse and the subject as subject. In Lacanian terms, the production of the ‘real’ of women as an excluded term of discourse is linked to the impossibility of symbolically representing women as such in a phallogentric fraternal order. In feminist terms, this symbolic economy renders ‘women’ as either the phantasy of ~~The~~ The Woman (the unattainable ideal of femininity, which is represented as struck through because of its impossibility) or as an excluded term (the gap or lack in the hegemonic representation of femininities). Following this approach, it becomes possible to understand how feminist knowledges can create new representations of this excluded real of women in social fictions.

Unlike social fictions, feminist knowledges represent the ‘real’ of women as other than the gap or lack within discourse. Rather, they symbolize and reinscribe it into the discourses of social fictions. This reinscription shifts the relation of signifying elements within the discourse, producing a new chain of signifiers. This reinscription can produce a new discourse, and thus a different representation of women. For example, let us take the phantasy of the workplace romance of *Confessions*. Luke Brandon is Rebecca’s charming and handsome employer both when they first meet and fall in love, and again when they become romantically involved at the end of the film. In contrast to this benign phantasy, the reality is that over 50% of working women in Britain experience sexual harassment as a problem in the workplace (Unison, 2008). The discursive structure of this social fiction can be seen below:

Social fictions: s-s-s-s-s identity | a
s-s-s-s-s femininity | ~~sexual harassment~~

This diagram describes the operation of the social fiction in which the phantasy of romantic love between employer and employee masks the reality of women's experience of sexual harassment in the workplace. This experience appears as struck through in the diagram because it is not represented in the social fiction of femininity.

However, feminist activists such as Catherine MacKinnon first named the reality of workplace harassment as an actionable form of sexual discrimination in the 1970s. The next diagram illustrates the structure of this feminist discourse:

Feminist discourse: -s-s-s-s-s femininity | sexual
harassment

Feminist discourses name this experience 'sexual harassment' and resignify it not as the flattering forms of male attention or attraction imagined in the conventional images of femininity but as a harmful form of sexual discrimination. In this way, feminist discourses signify this experience, rather than repudiate it. Feminist discourse thereby articulates this gendered social practice within the discourses of social fictions. Firstly, it changes the representation of that social practice by creating a new signifier of the 'real' of women and secondly it reinscribes that signifier into discourses of social fictions. The structure of this discursive operation can be illustrated in the following diagram:

Feminist discourses: 'real' of women => S => s-s-s-
s-s-s

By moving through the phantasy of femininity and naming the 'real' of women that is absent in social fictions, feminist knowledges can operate as transformative discursive practices. If discourse produces both social subjects and the relation between them, then creating new discourses produces different subjects and social relations. If social

fictions produce racialized and sexualized subjects, then feminist discourses permit the articulation of new discourses of subjects and their relations. Feminist knowledges can operate as radical discourses of subjectivity and intersubjectivity because they produce new discourses of how to be subjects and also how to exist in relation to other subjects.

Feminist discourses and communities

The production of these feminist knowledges is not singular, but plural. These knowledges are formed both by the relation of knowing subjects to other knowing subjects and by their collective relationship to the values of feminist politics. Feminist knowledges are not based upon the knowledge possessed by an autonomous knower. Rather, the epistemic positions of feminist knowers are collective. Elissa Marder argues that ‘when one “speaks as a feminist”, in the name of the feminist project, one must say “we”’ (Marder, 1992: 163). If to speak as a feminist is to speak as a member of a political collective project, then it is also to speak in a relation to other feminists. It involves shifting from being an individual political subject to being a member of collective feminist movements.

Whatever content is given to the term, a commitment to feminist politics marks its subject. Identification with feminist politics forms the subject as a speaking subject in feminist discourse and as having a relation to other members of a political movement. This series of secondary identifications with feminist politics (or people) as ideal objects, and with other members of the collective movement, produces this subjective position. These political identifications produce intersubjective and collective relations. They involve affective, imaginary and symbolic identifications, which construct the relation between subjects of feminist movements. These can involve affective identification with other women, imaginary identification with other members of

collective feminist movements and symbolic identification with feminist politics (Campbell, 2004b).

With this formulation of the collectively produced position of feminist knowers, Lorraine Code's and Helen Longino's descriptions of epistemic communities become very useful for understanding the production of feminist knowledge. In particular, their respective concepts of 'epistemic responsibility' and 'epistemic accountability' permit us to understand how feminist movements function as epistemic communities that negotiate cognitive goals and practices. In these negotiations, the knowing subject is responsible and accountable to feminist politics. The knower negotiates her responsibility and accountability within feminist discourses, so that feminist knowledges are contingent upon the relations between subjects and the dialogue between them. However, those dialogues are themselves produced in relation to a feminist politics. Each knowledge-claim describes not only a relation between members of the political movement but also their relation to feminist politics.

This structure of feminist epistemic communities charges knowers with an accountability to, and responsibility for, other subjects and feminist politics. The relations between these subjects, and in turn their relation to a feminist politics, constitute these epistemic communities, thereby structuring the negotiations of feminist knowledges by the criteria of responsibility and accountability. In this operation of the feminist epistemic community, knowers are accountable to feminist politics and ethically responsible to others. The knowledges that emerge in the dialogue between these subjects therefore are never simply (or only) epistemological. They are also political in their production in relation to feminist ideals and ethical in their constitution in intersubjective relations. This does not mean that these knowledges are necessarily

or inevitably satisfactory by political and ethical criteria. They are not, as evidenced by the racist and classist knowledges which some feminists produce. However, the explicit construction of feminist knowledges as accountable to feminist politics and as ethically responsible to others entails that political and ethical values become part of epistemic practice. The production and definition of the terms ‘feminist’ and ‘politics’ are continually negotiated because ‘feminist thinking has paradoxically defined itself in response to those questions of who or what’ (Marder, 1992: 149). This ongoing process negotiates and renegotiates who is named by the term and what such a naming implies.

With this understanding of feminist epistemic communities it becomes possible to identify how feminist discourses articulate those intersubjective relations. These discourses can be seen as representing a symbolic exchange with other subjects identifying with ‘feminist politics’. This symbolic relation between the subjects and the communities that comprise feminist movements produces feminist discourse. Code characterizes knowledge-claims in epistemic communities as ‘forms of address, speech acts, moments in a dialogue that assume and indeed rely on the participation of (an)other subject(s), a conversational group’ (Code, 1991: 121). Following this description, feminist knowledges are forms of address to feminist communities and speech acts within their discourses. Feminist knowledges can be characterized as dialogues with other politically committed subjects that are formed by the ‘conversational groups’ in feminist movements. Feminist discourses represent these dialogues between subjects identifying with feminist politics. These dialogues are therefore intergenerational and transnational, like the feminist movements that form them. For this reason, we can understand the political movements of feminism as constituting feminist epistemic communities.

Feminist communities of knowledge

In this approach, feminist knowledges can be seen as the epistemic claims that the discursive exchanges of feminist epistemic communities produce. This reformulates those knowledges as discursive practices that these communities of knowers constitute. Accordingly, they form a medium of relation between members of the feminist movement. Feminist knowledges do not simply consist of passive propositions with which all knowers agree. Rather, they function as the practices by which knowing subjects engage in symbolic exchange. Through these practices, knowers create and exchange new signifiers of selves and others. This is an epistemological model in which knowers participate in discursive exchange and are able to recognize each other as speaking subjects. It characterizes feminist knowledges as discourses that articulate the symbolic relation between feminist subjects as a new representation of selves and others.

In these discursive practices forms of feminist subjectivity and collectivity are constantly (re)negotiated in the consensus and dissent of feminist movements. The dialogic structure of feminist epistemic communities constitutes the productivity of feminist knowledges, since the negotiation of political forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity grounds their continual articulation and rearticulation. In this way, feminist epistemic communities give content to the ideas of ‘feminist politics’ and ‘feminist movement’, since they define those terms in that given moment.

This description of feminist knowledges characterizes them as discursive practices negotiated in the feminist movement. Feminist knowledges are therefore provisional, insofar as they are contingent upon their moment of production, and also strategic, because they are conditional upon the definition of the aims of the feminist movements

of their time. They also have a particular ethical and political form. Their production by a knower who is accountable and responsible to others gives them an ethical structure, and her relation to feminism gives them a political structure.

This accountability and responsibility also challenges feminist knowers to acknowledge and address the social, discursive and material inequalities that constitute epistemic communities. If epistemic communities construct knowledges, social relations also produce those communities. So the social, material and epistemic practices that reproduce inequitable social relations also form feminist epistemic communities. For this reason, Spivak insists in her early exchange with Rose that feminist epistemological questions must engage with the '*disenfranchised* woman who is *historically* different from ourselves, the subjects of feminist theory, and yet acknowledge that she has the right to the construction of a subject-effect of sovereignty in the narrow sense' (Spivak, 1989: 216). Feminist knowers have developed a number of material and epistemic practices that attempt to resist the reproduction of the existing social relations that position women as other than speaking subjects. Those practices, including equity of access, a politically aware use of language, redistribution of resources and non-hierarchical relations, actively work to construct democratic epistemic communities. As Spivak suggests, these practices at their most profound level must also involve the creation of new epistemic models. The ongoing challenge for third wave feminist epistemologies is to ensure that the constitution of epistemic communities is always a political and ethical act that constructs all women as speaking rather than silent subjects.

Feminist discourse as a new social bond

Feminist knowledges can thus represent new discourses of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Unlike social fictions, these discourses do not represent social relations between men but instead social relations between women as speaking subjects. In these discourses, the subject enters discursive relation to other women (rather than becoming part of the social exchange of women ‘on the market’, as Irigaray puts it). These symbolic relations between women form feminist discourses and permit the symbolization of new intersubjective relations. In turn, this symbolization produces new signifiers of feminism, which, when inserted into its existing signifying chains, can produce different discourses. Ultimately, these discourses can symbolize new social relationships between men and women, as well as between men because they articulate new forms of subjects and social relations. This symbolization of new social bonds can become the basis for the reworking of the socio-symbolic order of social fictions.

So, rather than succumbing to post-feminist melancholia by falling into a depressive position in which the socio-symbolic says all and nothing of women, feminist discourse ‘bring[s] about new forms of representation and definition of the female subject’ in order to produce new symbolic and social forms (Braidotti, 1992: 182). Feminist discourses can resignify existing social discourses through their representation of the ‘real’ of women, and so produce new discourses of what it means ‘to be’ a subject. In this way, feminist knowledges build new discourses of subjectivity and, in particular, of female subjectivity.

In this model, feminist discourse symbolizes the relation between feminist subjects. It functions as the material of that relation, and hence as its mediation. Feminist epistemic communities produce this discursive tie, which articulates a relation between women. Crucially, feminist discourse symbolizes these intersubjective relations

between women in terms of feminist politics. They articulate a relation between women as speaking subjects. In Irigaray's terms, feminist discourse constructs a female sociality in its symbolization of a horizontal relation between women – 'les femmes entres elles'. By doing so, feminist discourses can produce a social contract between female subjects, and hence a new discursive social bond.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the ethical and political practices of feminism are integral to the construction of that social bond. Unlike other discourses, such as the social fictions of the fraternal social contract, feminist discourses articulate the relation between subjects as ethical and political practices. Ethical relations to other women and commitments to feminist politics form the intersubjective relations of feminist subjects. This does not entail that the relation between feminist subjects is necessarily ethical or political, but that commitments to feminist politics construct those relations in terms of ethical and political values. If discourse articulates social bonds, then feminist discourses articulate different forms of social bonds because they build new ethical and political representations of social relationships. This new social bond does not posit women as objects of exchange, but rather as social subjects. They become speaking subjects and, accordingly, subjects within the social order. This new socio-symbolic contract represents women as knowers, as the makers and users of signs. This opens the possibility that feminist discourses can create original epistemological models, and that these new epistemologies can serve as the basis for the creation of alternative and better ways to know our selves and our others.

From post-feminist discontents to feminist discourses

If the terms of the new sexual contract promise that women can enter the economic exchange of objects in consumer capitalism, feminist psychoanalytic theory reveals that

they do so *as sexuated subjects*, and that the *sexual terms* of the sexual contract remain unchanged. It illuminates how the new sexual contract offers two different forms of exchange, structured through different social fictions of femininities. The first is the conventional path of Rebecca, which involves heterosexual monogamy (and of course ultimately marriage and children). The price to be paid for this is her economic freedom, for she becomes an employee of Luke. It is this path that the 'have it all' generation is now suffering. The second path is that of the new oppressive hypersexualized femininities, in which women 'make sex objects of other women and of themselves' (Levy, 2006). It is this second path that has become increasingly visible to young women. This 'raunch culture' is an intensification of the sexual competition of 'women on the market'. This is visible in *Confessions* in the character of blonde and leggy Alicia, Rebecca's sexual competition for Luke's affection, and who is introduced to the businessman as a Finnish prostitute in the final scene. Both positions enact the normative femininities that circulate through this socio-symbolic order. This psychoanalytic perspective helps to identify the costs of any new (fraternal) sexual contract that is supported by the phantasmic social fiction of ~~The~~ Woman, and how the 'problem' of femininity is also the problem of masculinity in this social order.

What, then, do women want? In McRobbie's diagnosis of the new sexual contract, she argues that the 'sexual contract on the global state is most clearly marked out in the world editions of young women's magazines' such as *Grazia* (McRobbie, 2009: 59). In a recent edition, columnist Tanya Gold (2013) comments that 'we need to recognize that we have had a sexual and consumer revolution, but that that's not equality'. In actuality, we have not yet had a feminist revolution in which Rebecca wants more than a green scarf and a rich husband. A feminist psychoanalytic approach can help to understand the operation of these social fictions of femininity and the pleasures and

pains of these ‘feminine’ desires. However, it also reveals that the operation of feminist knowledges can intervene in these discourses, and how these knowledges can symbolize more liberating forms of what women might want. This symbolization of new sexualities, subjects and social relations remains both the most radical promise and the most difficult task for third wave feminist epistemologies in these times of neoliberal politics and consumer cultures.

Notes

1. www.imdb.com/title/tt1093908/, accessed 20 March 2014.
2. www.boxoffice.com/statistics/movies/confessions-of-a-shopaholic-2009, accessed 20 March 2014.
3. www.sophiekinsella.co.uk/books/shopaholicseries/, accessed 20 March 2014.

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