GREY SEX

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Heterosexuality and Everyday Domination

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Introduction
What Is Grey Sex?

In between good sex and sexual violence lies a grey area: a range of experiences that are both ordinary and hard to understand. In this grey area, women who have sex with men find it difficult, if not impossible, to act in ways that honestly reflect what they – we – want. We, women, say yes when we want to say no, we hide our ambivalence, we perform false enthusiasm, we lose sight of our own desires, or we never discover those desires. For some of us, sex in this grey area may be so commonplace as to be unremarkable; to others it may feel unsettling or infuriating. It may be tempting for some to consider grey sex as an issue for the therapist's couch or for self-care: a problem that individual women should address within ourselves, perhaps by working to be more confident and assertive, or more in touch with our own desires. Alternatively, it may be tempting to fold grey experiences in with unambiguously unethical acts and crimes and to place blame squarely on men's shoulders. Both approaches are sometimes appropriate; some people really do need therapy and some people really are rapists. However, both approaches treat grey sex as an individual problem: a problem with individual women who fail to assert ourselves, or with individual men who rape or coerce women. Both avoid considering the complexity of the power dynamics of

a very common heterosexual experience, and therefore leave it only partially understood.

This binary tendency played out in the wake of *Babe* magazine's publication of the story of "Grace," a photographer who went on a date with comedian Aziz Ansari. Grace told journalist Katie Way that the evening turned into "the worst night of [her] life" and that Ansari's persistent sexual pressure constituted assault (Way 2018). While there was some thoughtful commentary by journalists and social media users at the time, the professional punditry tended to polarize around two competing interpretations: on one, Ansari's excessive pressure was in fact sexual assault; or the other, Grace simply failed to assert herself. With exceptional lucidity, journalist Julianne Escobedo Shepherd (2018) pointed out that "we are having arguments about bad faith thinkpieces and grotesque attempts to belittle Grace's experience, rather than actually talking about the socially ingrained cultural and political disparity that shows itself in dating scenarios." Put another way, we weren't thinking about power.

This book aims to do just that. Focusing specifically on heterosexual experiences and engaging women's interpretations of those experiences, it treats grey sex as a gendered political problem, linked to a system of domination that is an intersectional matrix (Collins 2009). To claim that grey sex is *gendered* is to say that grey sex appears most commonly as an experience in which women acquiesce to men and men benefit from that acquiescence, whether or not they actively elicit it (often they do). Grey sex appears to be endemic in heterosexual experience, and its costs and benefits are not evenly or randomly distributed among women and men. To say that it's *political* is to point to a link between grey sex and a larger structure of domination, including rape culture, which both produces instances of grey sex and is reproduced by them. The term *domination* denotes an unjust form of power that arbitrarily positions men and women unequally, while intersecting with hierarchies that position racialized groups and classes unequally. In cases of literal violence

against women, domination takes a brutal, interpersonal form, but this isn't its only form. When we understand domination as also denoting a particular kind of power hierarchy, which enacts relations of symbolic violence as well as relations of literal violence, we can begin to see linkages between everyday, seemingly uneventful or petty experiences and a larger, unjust structure. Seeing domination as systemic or structural and intersectional enables us to move away both from a crude, binary understanding of all men as powerful and all women as powerless and from a tendency to focus only on individuals.

To understand the linkages between specific experiences and structures of power, we need to examine instances of grey sex carefully. In heterosexual grey sex, women and men encounter each other in embodied moments, and what we do in those moments matters. If we want to understand the power at play in grey sex, women's stories also matter, but it's potentially uncomfortable to listen closely to stories such as Grace's. It may feel better to fall back on guilt–innocence binaries, which restore an appearance of agency to individuals, simplify questions of responsibility, and allow us to direct our bad feelings toward tangible targets. Finding someone to blame may allow us to replace feelings of vulnerability or confusion with anger or fierce self-discipline, as we either target specific men or blame ourselves but resolve to be smarter and more assertive in the future.

Let's attend more closely to Grace's original account instead, including its ambiguities. Journalistic controversies aside, the *Babe* article makes clear that Grace felt uncomfortable at the mismatch between her desires and Ansari's: he was moving way too fast, was too persistent, and was unable to hear her messages to slow down. If we respond only to Grace's feelings, we may find ourselves furious with Ansari: he seems selfish, entitled, and willfully impervious to clear social cues. However, she is also transparent that her communication was not as direct as it might have been: "Most of my discomfort was expressed in me pulling away and mumbling." When he asked, "where do you want me to

fuck you," she "found the question tough to answer because … she didn't want to fuck him at all" (Way 2018). It seems, however, that it *felt* impossible to Grace to simply say, "I don't want to fuck you at all." The tension between what Grace felt and what she did – far from being evidence of insufficient assertiveness (cf. Flanagan 2018, Weiss 2018) – is indicative of the working of a kind of power that feminists need to be able to articulate. *Why* was Grace unable to be more direct? *Why* do women who consciously reject the notion that we should be pleasing and submissive to men find it so difficult in the moment to say the very words that seem so obvious in retrospect?

"Grey sex" is a shorthand description for situations like the one Grace found herself in. It's a deliberately loose category, a starting point for thinking about a wide range of possible experiences, including sex that's hard to explain (even to ourselves), sex that was easier than saying no, sex we thought we should want (but didn't), and sex we had in order to be "nice." Each one of us gets to tell her own story, including revising that story over time. So any of us may, at one point, use "grey sex" to label something that doesn't quite feel like rape; over time, however, she may change her mind and decide that it was rape after all. A person could also use "grey sex" for an event that a third party – a friend, a therapist, a scholar – would call rape, but that she herself hesitates to call rape for any number of reasons. At the same time, "grey sex" functions to label experiences that no one could define as rape, but that still feel unsettling or violating. We might even use it for experiences that fall short of being sex but that have a sexual element. Grey sex includes heterosexual experiences under conditions of sexual and gendered inequality, in which the woman feels there was some involuntary quality, some lack of meaningful sexual freedom, some feeling of belittlement of her, or entitlement on the part of the man.

"Grey sex" is a pragmatic label intended to draw attention to a continuum of experiences for which feminists currently have no widely shared language; it is not an attempt to soften

injustice by implying ethical ambiguity where there is none. Temporarily at least, the phrase may describe events that are not ethically grey at all but that are perfectly legal, as well as events that I consider unethical but that might seem normal to others. My purpose is not to categorize specific kinds of events or distinguish "good sex" from "bad sex," so much as to analyze ambiguous experiences under conditions of inequality and structural domination – what many feminists simply call "patriarchy." Curiously, even researchers in the field of sexual violence have tended to turn away from terms such as "patriarchy" when talking about structural power dynamics that disadvantage women (particularly in the United States; see DeKeseredy 2021). However, the approach of this book is solidly within continuum frameworks – such as the one articulated by Liz Kelly (1988; Kelly and Westmarland 2016) – which aim to connect the horrific to the everyday, and clear "incidents" to patterns of gendered power. So, while I treat "grey sex" as a provisional label for a continuum of experiences, I also use the term "domination" to understand a range of experiences of power that, collectively, position women as subordinate in a gendered structure. This structure is inextricably interconnected to patterns of racial domination, colonialism, and capitalism as well, although this book's specific focus will often set these intersections outside its immediate frame.

What this book treats as essential to grey sex is the gap between what we wanted and what we did. We may look back on grey sex and see the ways in which we could have resisted, but didn't. We may look back and feel unsure about what it was that made it so difficult to do the thing we wanted to do. We may recognize that we had some agency but also feel as if that agency wasn't entirely our own, was limited, or was temporarily suspended – or as if some other force directed that agency. We may struggle to pinpoint how the man in question pressured or controlled us. We may feel unease, disgust, or anger (including at ourselves). Or we may feel nothing at all: we may be numb, or the experience may seem ordinary, more of a nonevent than an event.

I'm well aware that even hinting that the kinds of sex some people might be having are unjust or harmful will raise hackles. No one wants to be called a victim, or weak; no one wants their sex life judged; no one wants to be told how to feel. No one wants to be told that being a "good feminist" requires them to have certain kinds of sex and not others. But my aim isn't to tell anyone how to feel about their experiences, or to tell them that what they thought was good was actually bad, or to encourage anyone to center their identity on bad sexual experiences while marginalizing the rest of their story. My aim is also not to tell someone who prefers less ambiguous terms, such as assault or coercion, that their experience was ambiguous. People must interpret and reinterpret their own experiences. My hope is to use the phrase "grey sex" as a rough boundary sketched around a continuum of experiences of everyday heterosexual domination, and then to build a theory of power on the basis of a close examination of examples of those experiences. It is to offer tools that can be used to open up additional possible interpretations of experiences, and to empower critique.

Grey is nebulous, vague, shifting. Grey implies an area with fuzzy edges. Grey evokes smoke and mirrors. It's difficult to find one's bearings under a grey sky. Grey describes an object that's almost invisible against a foggy backdrop, its outline unclear, its presence in question. Grey can feel tepid, or like nothing at all. Grey's shifting quality, through which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and vice-versa, is uncanny. A grey sexual experience may seem like a nonevent from one vantage point, and then emerge later with crisp clarity. Contrast the color grey with poet Audre Lorde's (2007) metaphor for the erotic as a concentrated pellet of golden color that, broken open, permeates reality with joy. This is not to claim for the feminist theorist the privileged position of blowing the clouds away and bringing back the sun. Every specific rape is defined by the desires of the person who is raped. Except for the most brutal cases, no observer can know whether a given act was rape or not without listening to the participant or victim's story. Similarly, every instance

of what could be grey sex has to be named by the person who experienced it, as they interpret the words, sounds, gestures, actions, intentions, emotions, sensations that occur in any sexual experience. If the key truth of the person who is raped is "I didn't want it," the key truth of people who experience grey sex may be "I don't think I wanted it, but I agreed to it and I'm not sure why." Focusing on this puzzlement treats as essential information women's own accounts of the complexities of agency and the responsibility that we ourselves experience.

Challenges in Thinking about Grey Sex

Listening to and thinking about women's accounts, however, is not straightforward; it's not simply a matter of shining a light on previously hidden experiences, or presuming that experiences speak for themselves in an unambiguous way. The project of thinking about grey sex is complicated by the intersectional qualities of the power dynamics at play, by a lack of pre-existing interpretive resources, and by the inherent limitations posed by any single scholar's capacity for addressing these challenges sufficiently.

Empathizing with women like Grace is essential. But in this example, responding *only* to Grace's feelings not only will fall short of enabling understanding of the gendered power at work; it also risks reproducing racialized power structures that intersect with gendered ones. Sociologists Vrushali Patil and Jyoti Puri (2021) analyze the stories shared most frequently on social media about the *Babe* account and find that there were virtually no widely read, thoughtful treatments of the racial dynamics between Grace, who is widely presumed white, and Ansari, whose ancestry is South Asian. Patil and Puri remind us that, in "societies with white supremacist histories such as the United States, men of color have all too frequently been at the center of public discussions or, more accurately, public inflammations on discussions of sexual violence" (Patil and Puri 2021, 703).

These histories ought to "complicate any simple, binary approach to victims and perpetrators," especially when the victims are white women (708). In short, as antiracist and intersectional thinkers and activists have long warned, the victim–perpetrator binary risks reproducing white supremacist constructions of the gendered power dynamics at play, implicitly positioning white women as innocent and men of color as guilty (see e.g. Crenshaw 1991, Davis 1981, Tambe 2018, Wells 2008).

Another binary often overlaps with the victim–perpetrator one: the notion of "bad date" versus crime. Of course, sometimes it is important to distinguish between acts that are merely bad (and basically apolitical) and acts that ought to be considered crimes. However, in cases of grey sex, the bad date–crime binary avoids analysis of the power dynamics at work, and also risks reproducing racialized power structures. This binary implicitly offers two options as solutions: either the woman involved should work on herself (in a therapeutic or entrepreneurial mode) to be more assertive on future dates, or she should make legal allegations against the man involved. Both these approaches only seem apolitical; in reality they risk reinscribing existing power structures. They potentially reflect racial and class privileges in a number of ways: by implying that one can isolate a bad heterosexual experience as only gendered, by encouraging individualized solutions (which often depend on access to "self-care" resources), by trusting that one's self-assertion will be applauded and that one's suffering will be taken seriously, and by turning to the state to protect one from harm. A more nuanced and structural understanding of the power at work in ambiguous heterosexual experiences may help move feminist dialogue past these binary approaches toward more solidaristic ones.

One of this book's aims is to respond to a hermeneutical injustice: a lack in the interpretive resources available to women for thinking through and communicating our own experiences (Fricker 2007). Due to our subordinate position in a gendered power structure, even the most

privileged among us have historically been underrepresented in the very fields in which such resources are developed, such as academia, journalism, and the law. (And those of us who achieve success in these fields may thoroughly internalize their existing standards to do so.) As a result, as Miranda Fricker writes, "the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible" (Fricker 2007, 148). Put another way, some injustices are not well captured by legal definitions of specific crimes, but are nonetheless very significant.

The impulse to sort grey experiences into assault, on the one hand, and (merely) bad sex, on the other, results in part from a lack of interpretive resources. Complicating this cognitive lack are the emotions that both speakers and listeners may feel – about our own experiences, about the lack of language for communicating them, about others' experiences, about the larger political contexts in which the significance of the sexual mistreatment of women is often minimized, and so on. Wrestling with complex thoughts and intense feelings about our experiences, speakers choose concepts that come closest to the meanings they want to convey and that may promise some emotional expression or relief. Our sense that something deeply wrong happened may fuel a desire to use a clear, potent term without qualification; any softening of a claim such as "it was assault" may feel like a betrayal of our sense that something bad happened. However, a term like "assault" – a specific legal concept, implying a crime – does not always fit. That mismatch itself provokes emotional reactions. A number of Grace's readers claimed that "assault" did not accurately describe her experience; those who rejected the term most forcefully tended to refer to their own experiences of sexual violence and to defend the need to restrict legal terms to more obviously harmful and traumatic experiences (Shih 2018). In contexts in which experiences of sexual violence, coercion, and domination are all-too-often normalized, a

scarcity of adequate terms and concepts for analyzing those experiences creates doubt all around that our experiences will be taken seriously or will be met with any concern at all. Such scarcity thus undermines the potential for solidarity across a variety of experiences.

Attempting to develop meanings and interpretive resources to fill in the gaps left by hermeneutical injustice is therefore a necessary but delicate operation. It is made even more challenging by the need to interpret women's own stories – or reinterpret their own interpretations. Such reinterpreting risks enacting for them the fresh injustice of implying that we doubt the very women whose experiences we hope to understand. On the one hand, developing useful concepts requires taking stories seriously; we cannot bootstrap ourselves out of a lack of intellectual resources by relying entirely on existing intellectual resources. On the other, in the presence of hermeneutical injustice, a little critical distance from storytellers' narrative choices, especially of terminology, is necessary. The challenge is to trust women's expertise on their own experiences, while not taking any single version of a story as a fixed and absolute account of the truth. It is to take women's stories seriously without taking them literally. This approach is a variation on Fricker's suggestion to "'listen through' to the meaning that is immanent in what the speaker is saying" (Fricker 2007, 172). It entails listening through to the feelings and sensations described, tolerating apparent contradictions without rushing to resolve them, and remaining sensitive to details that may not quite make sense. It entails listening to what is unsaid. It entails looking for what Fricker calls corroborating evidence.

In this book I seek to do all these things by looking for patterns across accounts, considering my own experiences and those of other women as well. Since I began this research, many women – from perfect strangers who have approached me at conference presentations to colleagues, students, friends, and family members – have informally told me their stories. Figuratively speaking, they all continue

to speak to me as a silent chorus, informing my thinking. However, with the exception of a few brief examples (used with permission), I treat all their stories as private and do not recount them here. Instead I overwhelmingly rely on existing, published accounts. Many of these accounts come from empirical researchers' work, and I trust these researchers and their publishers to have gained the requisite permissions and protected the identities of the women they write about. I also rely on several women's stories published by those women under their own names. I trust them, too, to have made careful judgments about whether and how to share their stories.

Where I offer additional possible interpretations of any woman's story, I do so with the intention of addressing a current lack in interpretive framework, and hope that the usefulness of the project outweighs the risk of appearing to doubt the storyteller. I do not doubt the storytellers. But I do at times suspect limitations in the interpretive resources at their disposal. To understand grey sex better and move beyond existing legal concepts of assault and consent, we may need to resist the impulse to achieve linear or legalistic narratives (Brison 2002). We need to recognize women who have experienced grey sex as subjects, who are responding in their own ways to experiences that may have made them feel like objects. As for myself, a theorist who has experienced her own grey sexual events, I remind myself that, when I respond to another dominated subject's response, I am also responding to my own experiences at the same time. Ultimately I'm aware that my argument – the idea that much of the power that both produces and is reproduced by grey sex can be thought of as domination – is in part an effort to make sense of my own experience. My mode, then, is to speak provisionally, in full awareness that I am a single, situated voice, which offers alternative tools for interpretation rather than staking competing or dogmatic interpretations of other women's experiences.

I write as a descendant of European settlers in the United States and as someone with significant educational and class