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Representational and Attitudinal Sexual Objectification: Philosophical Insights from James Tiptree Jr.'s "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side"

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**Representational and Attitudinal Sexual Objectification:
Philosophical Insights from James Tiptree Jr.’s “And I Awoke and
Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side”¹**

Michael Rea

Abstract

“James Tiptree Jr.” is a pseudonym of Alice B. Sheldon, US Air Force intelligence officer, CIA analyst, experimental psychologist, and one of the most important and highly acclaimed science fiction writers of the twentieth century. Sheldon’s work as Tiptree (both fiction and nonfiction) deals with a variety of important feminist concerns—among them, sexism, misogyny, objectification, sexual assault, the “otherness” of women, and silencing. This paper explores in a philosophical mode some of the important insights about objectification conveyed in one of Tiptree’s most well-known stories, “And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side.” These insights lead naturally to a characterization of sexual objectification that both avoids problems with standard philosophical characterizations and also sheds important light on the relationship between objectification and silencing.

Keywords: objectification, silencing, dehumanization, Tiptree, science fiction, Keats

“James Tiptree Jr.” is a pseudonym of Alice B. Sheldon, US Air Force intelligence officer, CIA analyst, experimental psychologist, and one of the most important and highly acclaimed science fiction writers of the twentieth century. Sheldon’s work as Tiptree (both fiction and nonfiction) deals with a variety of important feminist concerns—among them, sexism, misogyny, objectification,

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “Minds of Our Own” conference at MIT in November 2018. I am indebted to the members of the audience on that occasion—especially Elizabeth Barnes, Sara Bernstein, Robin Dembroff, Heather Logue, and Aleksy Tarasenko-Struc—for helpful comments and follow-up conversation. I am also grateful to Ross Cameron, Michelle Panchuk, Callie Phillips, two anonymous referees for this journal, and Kathryn Norlock for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

sexual assault, the “otherness” of women, and silencing. In this paper, I explore what I take to be some of the important insights about the nature and harm of sexual objectification conveyed in one of Tiptree’s (2004) most well-known stories, “And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side.”

Sexual objectification is not the only kind of objectification, but it is the primary focus in this paper. More exactly, my focus will be on what we might call *attitudinal* and *representational* sexual objectification—that is, sexual objectification that is accomplished by the way we perceive, regard, or represent (by way of images, descriptions, etc.) someone rather than by the way we treat them behaviorally.² Accordingly, unless otherwise indicated, where I speak simply of “objectification” or of “sexual objectification,” it is to be understood that I mean “attitudinal or representational sexual objectification.” I do, however, think that much of what I say here applies to other forms of objectification as well.

In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of both the story and the Keats poem to which its title alludes—“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (Keats 1977, 334–336)—and then draw out what I take to be its central insights about objectification. These insights lead naturally to a characterization of objectification that both avoids some of the problems with more familiar philosophical characterizations and also (as I shall explain only very briefly) sheds important light on the relationship between objectification and silencing. Specifically, I argue, in light of the discussion of the two fictional texts in sections 1 and 2 and the problems with standard characterizations of sexual objectification that I discuss in section 3, that attitudinal and representational sexual objectification essentially include regarding or representing someone in a way that discourages normatively appropriate levels of empathetic attention to or identification with the interests and desires of the subject.

As one might gather from the brief description just provided, the paper begins with literary analysis and only toward the end moves into more paradigmatically philosophical discussion. It is perhaps natural to wonder whether the philosophical insights are separable from the literary discussion and, if they are, what substantive work is being done by the latter. The answer is that the literary analysis sheds evidential light on the philosophical claims. Typical philosophical thought experiments—for example, Gettier cases or the miniature science fiction scenarios that populate the literature on personal identity—are thin fictions

² For purposes here, I assume that how a subject is represented depends on context, so that (for example) displaying in a pornographic context a photo that was originally created for and displayed in a nonpornographic context may well result in the repurposed photo representing the subject differently from how she was originally represented.

constructed to elicit specific, simple intuitions that are supposed to serve as evidence for philosophical claims. More robust, literary fictions, in my view, can elicit deeper and more complex intuitions that play a similar evidential role, but literary analysis is sometimes needed to see what exactly the fiction is doing. This, in short, is the aim of the literary portion of the present paper. I submit that understanding the Tiptree story in light of its allusion to the Keats poem lends evidential support to some of the key claims about objectification that I will be making in the more paradigmatically philosophical parts of the paper. The claims themselves could be made in isolation from the literary discussion; but I could support them only by substituting my own, inevitably thinner, fictions contrived to do the work presently being done by my discussion of Tiptree and Keats.

1.

“And I Awoke” is the story of a (male) journalist come to the newly built Big Junction spaceport to catch a glimpse of the various kinds of aliens and alien spacecraft that are beginning to show up there. On his way in, he meets an unnamed workman waiting for his wife (who shows up only briefly at the end), about to head for home. The journalist pauses to ask a question, and the two fall into conversation. As they talk, the workman speaks in an increasingly frustrated and despairing way of the damage wrought upon his psyche since he first came into contact with various alien races back on Earth, in the Little Junction Bar. The journalist first mistakes him for a xenophobe, but what shortly emerges is that the problem is (superficially, at any rate) much the opposite: aliens as such hold him completely in thrall.³

He reports wandering into Little Junction Bar “by accident” at age eighteen, but then says:

No. Correct that. You don’t go into Little Junction by accident, any more than you first shoot skag by accident.

You go into Little Junction because you’ve been craving it, dreaming about it, feeding on every hint and clue about it, back there in Burned Barn, since before you had hair in your pants. Whether you know it or not. Once you’re out of Burned Barn, you can no more help going into Little Junction than a sea-worm can help rising to the moon. (Tiptree 2004, 35)

³ If I am right in thinking, for reasons explained below, that the workman objectifies the aliens, there may be a case to be made for thinking that the charge of xenophobia sticks. But exploring this question would take me too far afield.

What shortly becomes clear is that the craving the workman is talking about is, at least on its surface, sexual. “Little Junction,” he says, “was the place the lower orders [of aliens] went, the clerks and drivers out for kicks. Including, my friend, the perverts. The ones who can take humans. Into their beds, that is.” (35) What is hinted at here and expressed more strongly later on is that the aliens come to the bar simply for fun and, in the case of the “perverts,” for a kind of casual, somewhat entertaining sexual tourism. The humans, by contrast (the males, anyway), are *drawn* to the bar by a nearly *irresistible* craving for sex with the aliens—not any particular alien (or even any particular race of aliens) but just aliens *as such*.

As the story continues, what emerges is that the desire between humans and aliens is, from the workman’s point of view, one-sided: “It’s humans with aliens, right? Very seldom aliens with other aliens. Never aliens with humans. It’s the humans who want in.”⁴ (37) Moreover, the apparently unreciprocated human desire rises to the level of a soul-destroying obsession. Human males are abject in the presence of the aliens. The workman sees this, and laments it. Misunderstanding, the journalist asks, “Is that the message you want to give Earth? Never love an alien?” (39). But the workman demurs. In what is probably the most famous passage of the story, he says:

What I’m trying to tell you, this is a trap. We’ve hit the supernormal stimulus. Man is exogamous—all our history is one long drive to find and impregnate the stranger. Or get impregnated by him; it works for women too. Anything different-colored, different nose, ass, anything, man *has* to fuck it or die trying. That’s a drive, y’know, it’s built in. Because it works fine as long as the stranger is human. For millions of years that kept the genes circulating. But now we’ve met aliens we can’t screw, and we’re about to die trying. . . . Do you think I can touch my wife? (Tiptree 2004, 40)

As he sees it, the obsession with aliens—an obsession that, in the world of the story is *impossible* to fully satisfy because not all of the aliens who are its object are sexually compatible with humans—is not about love. In fact, it is apparently a destroyer of love, having undermined his ability to desire and connect with his wife. Moreover, he insists that it is also not really about sex. “Sex?” he says. “No, it’s deeper. . . . Man, it’s deep . . . some cargo-cult of the soul. We’re built to dream outwards. They laugh at us. They don’t have it.” (40)

⁴ Perhaps it is genuinely one-sided; but, like the faery woman in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the aliens have no voice of their own in this story, and so we should perhaps wonder about the reliability of the workman’s assessment. (Thanks to Michelle Panchuk for this observation.)

The reference to “cargo cults” has led some commentators to interpret this story as saying something about colonialism, power, and money.⁵ More commonly the story is seen to be concerned primarily with sex, gender, or (in Veronica Hollinger’s words) the “damning nature of heterosexuality.”⁶ For my part, I am happy to think that Tiptree may have had all of these ideas in mind in writing this story; but, as I read it, whatever else he⁷ may intend, Tiptree also aims to say something about objectification—both about its nature and about the damage it does to the objectifier. Sexual objectification features quite obviously as a theme in other Tiptree stories—most notably, “The Girl Who was Plugged In” and “With Delicate Mad Hands.” But the key to arriving at this interpretation of “And I Awoke” lies mainly in the story’s allusive title—a quotation from Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”—and in reflecting on the connection between that allusion and the idea of a cargo cult of the soul.

2.

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is a poem about a knight held in thrall by a faery woman. The poem’s narrator begins by inquiring of the knight why he is to be found “alone and palely loitering,” and the knight replies by talking about his encounter with the faery. On his telling, he met her, was captivated by her beauty, set her on his horse, and was taken by her to an “elfin grot” where she declared her love for him and he, in turn, “shut her wild wild eyes with kisses four.” He then recounts a dream, which also gives the explanation for his being alone and loitering:

And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—“La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!”

⁵ This interpretation is developed in an online article, apparently no longer available, by Adam Roberts entitled “James Tiptree Jr.’s ‘And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side’ as Neocolonialist Fable,” discussed in Pearson (2006).

⁶ See Pearson (2006) and Hollinger (1999).

⁷ Following other commentators on Alice Sheldon and her work as Tiptree, I use masculine pronouns in reference to the Tiptree identity and feminine pronouns in reference to Sheldon.

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.
(Stanzas 9–12)

The faery woman of this poem is usually seen as a classic *femme fatale*.⁸ Moreover, commentators note that, as is common with fictions that include a *femme fatale*, she is represented exclusively from a male viewpoint and characterized solely in terms of her relationship to the interests and experiences of a man. That she is a woman *without mercy*, for example, is not evidently her own self-understanding. Rather, it is how men in the poem characterize her, and the characterization is apparently grounded entirely in the fact that she excites tremendous, psychologically incapacitating desire in them yet fails to allow for its full consummation. What Tiptree seems to be saying with the allusion is that the aliens of the story's universe are relevantly like the faery woman: they drive human beings to an obsessive desire which is never fully consummated, and then—without mercy—leave them abject, “alone and palely loitering.”

Multiple critics have linked the Keats poem with something akin to objectification and silencing. For example, early in her book, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Virginia Allen (1983, 47) notes that “Keats's Belle Dame [embodies] central characteristics of the *femme fatale*,” even if she is “not yet a full-blown *femme fatale*.”⁹ Then, in partial summary of her conclusions regarding *femmes fatale* in nineteenth century art and literature, she writes:

The overall erotic meaning of the works portraying the *femme fatale* to their makers could hardly be more explicit. *Whether in paint, poetry, or novel, in art forms made primarily by men for men, the lady exists only to fulfill her sexual destiny.* The end result is an “iconic” image of Woman, who, in most

⁸ See Allen (1983, 45–48), Craciun (2003, 161–162), and Praz (1951, ch. 4).

⁹ Ryals (1959, 438) characterizes the Belle Dame as “the prototype of all nineteenth-century Fatal Women.”

of her forms, is as immobile and silent, as utterly remote, as the Sphinx she so often resembles. (1983, 186; italics mine)

Allen goes on to argue that the femme fatale developed as a stereotype in nineteenth century art and literature partly in reaction to feminism, reflecting male concerns about female emancipation (especially sexual independence). She ultimately concludes that “the central issue embodied in images of the femme fatale is precisely the issue of male sexual dominance” (196).¹⁰

But why, exactly, is the representation of the faery woman appropriately understood as objectifying or silencing? My own route to understanding this runs through Tiptree’s allusion, together with his remark about cargo cults; and, as I will shortly explain, the path leads to some novel insights about objectification and its relationship to silencing.

The term “cargo cult” has been used (both in common discourse and academic discussion) to refer to a variety of religious, or at least religiously inflected, movements that developed among people groups in the Pacific Islands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the wake of contact with Europeans, Americans, and their technologies and products.¹¹ I want to note before proceeding with this discussion that both the term itself and the concept are in various ways problematic—not least because of the fact that the term appears to have been coined either by Western colonizers or by people sharing similarly demeaning views of the people groups within which these movements arose. Lamont Lindstrom reports that the term was first introduced in print by in 1945 by Norris Mervyn Bird in a colonial news magazine “as a calumny” (Lindstrom 2018) that reflected the “honest racism” of its author and as a more generalized replacement for another derogatory term (“Vailala madness”) that had been previously used to characterize these movements (Lindstrom 1993, 13–15). He notes further that, prior to Bird’s encounter with it, the term had emerged “in the midst of an ongoing, tricorned struggle among expatriate planters and businessmen, Christian missionaries, and colonial administrators, many of whom had the habit of cloaking their interests behind a rhetoric of doing what’s best for the native.” (Lindstrom 1993, 15) Nonetheless, it quickly made its way into academic discussion and, although Lindstrom notes that it has now largely been abandoned by anthropologists, it does still have its defenders.¹² That said, having now noted the relevant ethical concerns, I will continue to use the term in this discussion because it is the term used both by

¹⁰ See also Mellor (2001, esp. 223).

¹¹ For fuller characterizations, see Lindstrom (1993, esp. 1) and Worsley (1987, esp. 11–12).

¹² See, e.g., Otto (2009).

Tiptree and by most of the scholarly sources I have consulted (including Lindstrom's work), and because I have found no suitable replacement for it.

Returning, then, to the characterization of cargo cults: For purposes here, the most salient feature of these social movements is that they were characterized in part by what appeared to be the fetishization of Western goods. Ballpoint pens, bicycles, tape decks, Coca-Cola, and Mickey Mouse watches are the examples mentioned in the Tiptree story, though more central examples of "cargo" would be certain kinds of food, tobacco, knives, and axes.¹³ Cargo cults took various different forms, but the common element that matters for this paper and which Tiptree seems to have in mind is the investment of cargo (conceived of en masse) with a value and symbolic significance that is—not only from the point of view of Western culture, but also, apparently, from the point of view of the local culture—both excessive and to some extent disconnected from the true nature and purpose of the goods in question.¹⁴ No harm is done to a knife or a bit of tobacco in being treated this way; but it is easy to imagine that, if a person were treated as cargo, such treatment would be harmful. Importantly, too, it seems that the fetishization of Western goods was harmful to the people who fetishized them. The fetishization arose at least in part out of the subordination that the Pacific Islanders experienced at the hands of Europeans and Americans, and it disconnected them in important ways from their own native lifestyle and culture (Cochrane 1970). Plausibly, too, the fetishization of cargo made it harder for those involved in the cargo cult to engage the relevant goods "on their own terms," as it were, according to their "true natures."

This is, of course, exactly the position in which the human beings—particularly the men—of Tiptree's story stand in relation to the aliens. The central idea of the story seems to be that, insofar as they are held in the grip of the desire to "fuck it or die trying," the men of the story have stopped treating the aliens on their own terms as who and what they really are—beings with their own thoughts and interests and desires who are to be engaged on a personal level—and have instead started to fetishize them, desiring them excessively and for purposes alien to their nature. Indeed, in the case of many of the aliens, the sexual purpose for which the humans desire them is deeply *contrary* to their nature, since they are known to be sexually incompatible with humans. Furthermore, Tiptree seems to be saying that just like those participating in a cargo cult, such men are abject, subordinated to the beings who possess the bodies they desire and, at the same time, disconnected from their own "native culture," the network of friendly, loving, and erotic human relationships. Accordingly, they are left "alone and palely loitering,"

¹³ See Cochrane (1970), Jarvie (1963), Stanner (1958), and Worsley (1987).

¹⁴ See Cochrane (1970), Worsley (1987), and, especially, Stanner (1958).

vilifying as merciless the beings who will not—and in many cases *cannot*—satisfy their misplaced desires and, at the same time, suffering in the misery of loneliness and disconnection from others.

In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the viewpoint of the female is, as I have already mentioned, entirely omitted; and, we might add, she is represented in such a way as to render her viewpoint *wholly irrelevant* to the interests and desires of the men who are erotically obsessed with her. Her sexual unavailability is not portrayed simply as a result of interest in other things; it is instead the most salient aspect of what constitutes her as dangerous and cruel. Similarly, Tiptree represents the attitude of the men in his story toward the aliens as roughly parallel to the knight’s attitude toward the Belle Dame; and, in doing this while at the same time making reference to cargo cults, he seems to be saying that people—but, in light of the direct allusion to the Keats poem, most notably *women*—who are viewed and represented in this way are objectified. That term, of course, appears nowhere in the story; but the cargo-cult imagery brings into high relief the fact that the aliens are, in some sense, mere (sex) objects for the human beings who are obsessed with them. And, again, this fact together with the allusion to Keats invites us to see Keats’s faery woman in much the same light.

But in what, exactly, does the objectification of the aliens and the Belle Dame consist? The workman insists that “it’s deeper than sex”; and the Keats poem, too, suggests much the same idea. (One does not get the impression, for example, that the knight is merely sexually frustrated. The faery woman is not, after all, fungible; not just any suitably attractive and exotic partner will do for him. But she is objectified nonetheless.) This suggests, then, that as Tiptree understands sexual objectification, there is something misleading about saying that it consists in the aliens being, for the workman, mere sex objects. In the final section of this paper, I will propose a characterization of objectification that both captures the sense in which the aliens of “And I Awoke” and Keats’s faery woman are objectified, and departs in theoretically fruitful ways from more standard characterizations. Before doing so, however, I want to briefly describe the standard characterizations and then highlight several problems.

3.

Philosophical accounts of objectification usually characterize it as a kind of treatment that has distinctively ontological implications. The objectifier treats someone as, by nature, a kind of thing that she in fact is not. (Talk of “treatment” sounds behavioral, and often in this literature it is. But for ease of discussion here I will assume that representing someone in a certain way, either in one’s attitudes toward them or in some representational medium, is also a form of “treatment.”) According to the two most well-known and widely discussed characterizations of

objectification—Catherine MacKinnon’s and Martha Nussbaum’s—the objectifier at least *denies or encourages the denial of* an important reality about the objectified person.¹⁵ But MacKinnon goes a step further than Nussbaum, insisting that that objectification does not merely involve an ontological mistake but in fact fundamentally *alters* reality.

MacKinnon nowhere develops a full-blown theory of objectification. But a reasonably robust characterization of it can be pieced together from her remarks in various papers on both objectification and pornography, and this characterization is one of the common starting points both in surveys of the literature on objectification (e.g., the ones I cited in footnote 13) and for the development of more detailed theories than she offers. In presenting MacKinnon’s view here, I simply follow Haslanger (2001) whose own account of objectification (and womanhood) takes inspiration from and to a significant extent follows MacKinnon’s.

On MacKinnon’s view (as presented by Haslanger), objectification consists partly in treating someone as being *for* the satisfaction of one’s own desires, as something whose purpose is to be used for the objectifier’s pleasure, and as something that is appropriately dominated. Furthermore, objectification involves seeing all three of these attributions as consequential upon the objectified individual’s *nature*: she is *by nature* something whose function is to satisfy the objectifier’s sexual desires and to submit to and be dominated by his pursuit of that satisfaction. But, on her view, objectification does more than this. Just as the social practices whereby pieces of paper with certain attributes are treated as *dollar bills* define the very nature of a dollar bill, constitute those pieces of paper as dollar bills, and endow them with their value as dollars, so too the social practices whereby the people who are women are objectified partly define the very nature of *womanhood*, partly constitute those people *as* women, and lend them the (dis)value embodied in the objectifying practices.¹⁶

Martha Nussbaum, by contrast, simply maintains that objectification involves treating someone in a way that denies (or, we might add, presupposes or encourages the denial of) important personal attributes. On her view, objectification is “treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (Nussbaum 1995, 257); and one is treated as an object to the extent that one is treated in the following ways:

¹⁵ See MacKinnon (1987, esp. chs. 10, 13 and 14) and Nussbaum (1995). Cahill (2011), Mikkola (2019), and Papadaki (2015) offer helpful surveys of the relevant literature.

¹⁶ See Haslanger (2001, 228–229) and MacKinnon (1987, 118–119, 174). The analogy with dollar bills is my own.

- as a tool for the objectifier's purposes [instrumentality];
- as lacking in autonomy and self-determination [denial of autonomy];
- as lacking in agency [inertness]
- as interchangeable with other objects [fungibility];
- as violable, or lacking in boundary-integrity [violability];
- as something owned by another [ownership]
- as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account [denial of subjectivity]. (Nussbaum 1995, 257)

To Nussbaum's list, Rae Langton (2009, 228–229) adds what she takes to be three additional kinds of treatment that constitute objectification: (i) identifying someone with their body or body parts [reduction to body]; (ii) treating someone primarily in terms of how they look or appear to the senses [reduction to appearance]; and (iii) treating someone as silent, lacking the capacity to speak [silencing]. It is not clear to me that these are genuine additions to Nussbaum's list. For example, it seems to me that reduction to body may be implied by the conjunction of instrumentality, denial of autonomy, and denial of subjectivity; reduction to appearance (depending on what, exactly, that amounts to) may be implied by the conjunction of fungibility and denial of subjectivity; and silencing may be implied by the conjunction of inertness and denial of subjectivity. But we needn't linger over these details; the differences between Nussbaum's list and Langton's, if they are indeed differences, will not much matter for the discussion that follows.

Unlike MacKinnon, Nussbaum thinks that objectification is not always problematic. The difference between acceptable and unacceptable instances of objectification, on her view, is that the former, in contrast to the latter, occur within a broader context of recognition and respect for the humanity of the objectified person. The most commonly cited example she uses to illustrate unproblematic objectification is the use of a lover's stomach as a pillow. A natural gloss on what is going on in such a case is that, in using the stomach of one's lover in this way, one treats them as an object—at the very least, as a tool for one's own purposes—but not as a *mere* object. In drawing the distinction this way, we can see more clearly the Kantian background to the contemporary philosophical discussion of objectification. In the present context, a *mere object* is something that is appropriately treated as a mere means, not an end in itself; and the concept of a mere object is understood in contrast to the concept of a rational agent. For both MacKinnon and Nussbaum, then, *harmful objectification* is a species of treating someone as a mere means and of disregarding their status as a rational agent. The main difference between their views, aside from the matter of whether and to what extent objectification shapes reality, is that MacKinnon reserves the term "objectification" exclusively for what I have just called *harmful objectification*,

whereas Nussbaum is willing to allow its expansion to cases where someone is treated as an object (in the various senses she identifies) but not a mere object.¹⁷

Both of the views just discussed put us in the right conceptual neighborhood to capture the commonsense notion of objectification. Both resonate with and make sense of familiar glosses on that notion—for example, that objectifying representations somehow reduce women to their bodies, portray or treat them as (mere) sex objects, dehumanize them, deny their true interests or desires, and so on. They also bear obvious resonance with the modes of objectification we find in the Keats poem and the Tiptree story. But, to my mind, they either ignore or paper over some important complications. Four are worth bringing explicitly to light.

First, representational media (pictures, films, written texts) cannot possibly represent *every* attribute of their subjects. But not every attribute that goes unrepresented in, for example, a picture is thereby *denied* by the picture; nor does every picture automatically *reduce* its subject to being just what is represented in the picture.¹⁸ So it is initially hard to see how representations that we intuitively think of as objectifying do to their subjects what (for example) MacKinnon, Haslanger, Langton, and others say that they do. Kathleen Stock (2018, 299–300, 302) has recently argued that objectifying images accomplish their effect by way of what we might characterize as a “mind-suppressing” quality: they “involve a phenomenal experience that de-emphasizes or ignores minded aspects of a person.” This is a helpful idea, and one that resonates in certain ways with my own suggestions in the next section. But, even so, it does not seem entirely correct. It is easy to imagine, for example, objectifying pornographic representations marketed specifically to individuals who are aroused in part by a particular psychological profile: emotionally needy people, cold and calculating people, people who love guns or motorcycles or long walks in the mountains, and so on. Such material would naturally include information about and encourage attention to the psychological profiles of its subjects, but the inclusion of such information would not necessarily negate the objectifying quality of the representations.¹⁹ In saying this, I do not mean

¹⁷ I am inclined to side with MacKinnon on this point, but will not argue the issue here. Cf. Papadaki (2010), Bauer (2015) and Stock (2015, 2018) for relevant discussion.

¹⁸ This point is made in both Nussbaum (1995) and Rea (2001).

¹⁹ Relatedly, Aleksy Tarasenko-Struc (2018) argues that certain sadistic behaviors both objectify their victims *and* essentially involve attention to the victims’ mental states. On his view, this is reason to think that one does not fully capture what is wrong with the behavior by noting that it objectifies the victim. But, as I see it, the argument goes through only on the mistaken assumption that objectification is inherently mind-suppressing, or mind-insensitive.

to suggest that the images remain objectifying simply because they are pornographic. Pornography is typically objectifying, but it does not have to be.²⁰ Rather, my point is just that reflection on this sort of case elicits the intuition that not all objectifying representations are mind-suppressing in the sense just described, and it does not seem that we can explain what makes such representations objectifying in terms of what they *deny* or *ignore* about the subject.

Second, it seems clear that a person can be explicitly represented *as by nature a mere sex object and an object whose purpose is to be dominated* without thereby being objectified.²¹ Imagine a sex worker writing in her diary, “I am nothing but a sex object, an object whose purpose is to be dominated for the satisfaction of men’s desires.” Suppose, furthermore, that this is the only entry. In that case it seems obvious that the diary represents her as nothing but a sex object whose purpose is to be dominated for the satisfaction of men’s desires.²² But it seems equally obvious that it is not an *objectifying* representation. Or, a bit more carefully: what is obvious is that it is *not necessarily a harmfully* objectifying representation. It is hard to see how such a diary entry could harm its author. But even if it can do so, it clearly does not have to. It could, for example, be the beginning of a therapeutic exercise; it could be a cathartic acknowledgment of what the sex worker takes to be the reality of her job; and so on. But if this is right, then, contrary to what both MacKinnon and Nussbaum would seem to agree upon, representing someone as by nature a mere sex object and one whose purpose is to be dominated is not sufficient for the representation to be harmfully objectifying.

One might reply on behalf of the view that I have attributed to Nussbaum and MacKinnon that, if the diary entry really were (say) part of a therapeutic exercise or a cathartic acknowledgment of a perceived reality, then the context would be one that includes positive regard for the humanity, autonomy, subjectivity, and so on of the sex worker; and one might go on to insist that this fact is what explains why it is not objectifying. But I think this reply is a mistake. The reason, in short, is that the facts that comprise the context of authorship are not necessarily part of the context of reception. Suppose all we have is the diary entry and our

²⁰ See Mikkola (2019, esp. chs. 5 and 7) for discussion.

²¹ This point, together with the example that illustrates it, is from an earlier article of mine (Rea 2001).

²² It might be objected that such an entry also represents the sex worker as reflective, troubled, falling into self-hatred, and the like. This is a tempting thought, but I am inclined to reject it. Granted, any suitably attentive reader would be justified in attributing any of a variety of mental states to the entry’s author, but I don’t think it follows from this that the entry *represents* the author as having those mental states. (Thanks to Callie Phillips for encouraging me to address this point.)

knowledge of the author's identity and profession; we have no further information about why it was written. We can speculate about the motives of authorship, but mere speculations do not supply us with an actual context. In this case, it seems, part of the reason why the diary entry fails to objectify its author is precisely the fact that we do not have the requisite context. But, again, it remains the case that the entry represents the author as nothing but a sex object whose purpose is to be dominated.

Third, critics of Nussbaum and MacKinnon have applied pressure to the distinction, crucial to both of their accounts and to others that have followed in their wake, between treating someone as an object and treating them as a *mere* object.²³ The problem, in short, is that, on the dominant philosophical account of human persons, human beings *are* material objects, so it is hard to see what the qualifier "mere" is supposed to signal. Imagine accusing someone of treating another person, X, as a *mere person*. What would one be saying about X, or about personhood generally, in using the qualifier "mere"? What would be the difference between treating someone as a person and treating them as a mere person?

The most natural response, and the one that is most readily seen lurking in the background of our discussion thus far, is that to treat someone as a mere object is to treat them as lacking *certain important attributes*, most notably personhood, agency, autonomy, or some relevantly similar attribute or cluster of attributes. But this response is not entirely helpful, for it is deeply unclear what it means to treat someone *as lacking* an attribute, especially when the form of treatment we are most interested in is representational or attitudinal. As I have already noted in discussing my first concern about these accounts, representations that merely omit an attribute do not automatically represent a person as lacking the attribute. What it would seem to take to represent a lack is some kind of explicit or contextually implicit affirmation that the representation is *complete*. For example, a picture of a torso that omits the person's head does not automatically depict the person as headless. What needs to be done is to portray the torso along with some of the empty space above the neck, so that one can see clearly that the torso is all there is. But, on the assumption that human persons *are* material bodies, it is not at all clear how or even that paradigmatically objectifying pictures displaying a person's body, or paradigmatically objectifying narratives that describe the use or abuse of a person's body, manage, one and all, to represent the absence of the relevant personal attributes.²⁴

²³ See Papadaki (2015) for a helpful survey, and LeMoncheck (1985) and Cahill (2011) for detailed discussion.

²⁴ I do not, of course, mean to suggest that such representations never represent the lack of at least some personal attributes. My point in this paragraph is just that it

Not only is it hard to account for what it would mean to treat someone as a mere object, but, as various critics of Nussbaum and MacKinnon point out, it is also hard to account for why it would be categorically bad to treat someone as a mere object. Discussing this issue in detail would take me too far afield (and unhelpfully so, since much of the relevant critique focuses on behavioral treatment rather than representational and attitudinal treatment). But one point is worth making briefly. Recall again the questions we'd likely ask if one person were accused of treating another as a "mere person." We would, among other things, wonder what the accuser thinks is so bad about personhood. In a similar vein, Ann Cahill argues that the very idea that there is something degrading or otherwise morally objectionable about being treated as a "mere thing" only makes sense in the context of a metaphysic that feminists typically oppose as problematic, one that privileges rationality and related attributes over materiality and embodiment. Following Gail Weiss (1999), she argues that a full embrace of human materiality, a "theory of personhood that celebrates rather than denigrates embodiment," undercuts the idea that there is harm in treating a person as a body and renders nonsensical the idea of being treated as a "mere" body (Cahill 2011, 25–26).

In light of this and related considerations, Cahill recommends abandoning the notion of objectification as a tool for capturing what is problematic about the forms of representation and treatment that we commonly describe as objectifying. In its place, she offers the concept of *derivativization*, which she characterizes as follows:

Grammatically, it follows the structure of the term to be replaced; if "objectify" means to "turn into an object," then "derivativize" means to "turn into a derivative." To derivativize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivativized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivativizing subject's existence—other elements of her . . . being or subjectivity are disregarded, ignored, or undervalued. (Cahill 2011, 32)

However, although I agree that there is merit and utility to the idea of derivativization as Cahill characterizes it, I think that adopting it as a replacement for the notion of objectification is the wrong move to make in response to the problems she and others have identified.

is hard to justify the claim that all paradigmatically objectifying representations represent the lack of whatever attributes are supposed to mark the distinction between mere objects and "human objects."

Cahill thinks the concept of objectification is unsalvageable because it is “closely connected with an implicit vilification . . . of the body” and other problematic associations (32). But I think this confuses the concept of objectification with existing philosophical accounts of it. As I hope the next section makes clear, it is possible to do justice to familiar glosses on the notion of objectification without falling into the problems discussed in this section. Moreover, Cahill’s notion of derivatization fares no better with respect to some of these problems. Notably, her account of derivatization resembles standard characterizations of objectification in taking the problem with representations and behaviors that we normally think of as objectifying women to consist in a kind of “ontological mistake,” one “whereby feminine subjectivity and sexuality are constructed as wholly derivative of masculine subjectivity and sexuality” (2011, 34). But in construing the problem this way, Cahill makes the notion of derivatization vulnerable to some of the same counterexamples that beset “ontological mistake” accounts of objectification. The case of the sex worker’s diary, for example, is a case wherein a representation makes precisely the ontological mistake that is supposedly constitutive of harmful objectification but, intuitively, does not objectify. But it is easy to imagine a different diary entry that makes precisely the ontological mistake supposedly constitutive of derivatization without being ethically problematic. Just let the diary say something like, “I am nothing but the reflection, projection, or expression of another being’s identity, desires, and fears.”

Turning now to the fourth and final problem with the accounts of objectification I have so far been considering, it seems that lines of domination need not always move from the objectifier to the objectified; and, accordingly, it seems that someone need not be regarded as an appropriate (or even possible) target of domination in order to be objectified by someone else. The aliens in the Tiptree story are neither dominated by the human beings nor perceived as dominable; in fact, quite the reverse seems to be true. They occupy not only the role of cargo-cult *objects* but also the role of supplier and controller of such objects. They are at once, as it were, the ballpoint pen *and* the Westerner who brings it. Yet they are objectified. Likewise with the Belle Dame. *She* is described as taking *him* to the elfin grot, not the other way around (though, admittedly, *he* puts *her* on the horse that gets them there). Moreover, insofar as she is characterized as a wild and magical creature holding him and others in thrall, she is presented as occupying an obvious position of autonomy and power that is both independent of and more genuine

than the otherwise dubious “power” she exerts simply by being the object of his erotic desire.²⁵ Yet she, too, is objectified.²⁶

4.

What, then, can be said about objectification that will do justice to these complexities? As a start, in light of the arguments of the preceding section, we should drop the idea that objectification is fundamentally a matter of affirming or presupposing some kind of ontological mistake in how one treats someone else. This is not to say that there is no merit whatsoever in the idea that objectification is a matter of treating something that is not a mere object as if it were a mere object, but I think we do better to regard this as a gloss on the notion rather than an analysis. What seems closer to the truth is that representational or attitudinal objectification most saliently involves representing or regarding someone in ways that facilitate or encourage a certain kind of treatment that we think of as more appropriate to nonsentient beings than to sentient beings, even if it does not quite rise to the level of treating the person *as* a nonsentient being.²⁷ The question is just what sort of representation or attitude does this kind of thing.

In the fictions by Tiptree and Keats, the most important element contributing to our seeing the aliens and the faery woman as objectified is the handling of their own viewpoints. For reasons already noted, their objectification cannot consist simply in the *omission* of their viewpoints. In fact, we might observe that the Tiptree story not only omits the viewpoint of the *aliens* but also the viewpoint of the

²⁵ On the power, more generally, of the femme fatale, see Allen (1983, ch. 9).

²⁶ In addition to the sources referenced in my discussion in section 2 of why the Belle Dame is objectified, see also Lee (1996) and Marsh (1985, 317) on the objectification of femmes fatales in general. Craciun (2003) highlights the “feminist potential” of the femme fatale and in so doing issues a challenge to the idea that all such portrayals are objectifying, but one need not disagree with her in order to agree with (e.g.) Allen’s general conclusions and their particular application to Keats. That said, though, I think that Allen’s explanation (in ch. 9) of why the femme fatale was such an attractive figure, even to women, goes some distance toward undermining Craciun’s conclusions.

²⁷ We might capture the distinction like this: Representing someone as passive and receptive to commands *encourages* and maybe *facilitates* treating her as a slave, but it will not necessarily rise to the level of representing her as a slave. Similarly, the sex worker’s diary entry (in the example from section 3) represents her as a mere object, but it does not obviously facilitate or encourage treating her as a mere object.

workman's *wife* (who also is referenced in his discourse, and briefly appears at the end). But only the aliens are objectified; the wife is not. What is the difference?

In the Tiptree story, the interests and desires of the aliens are not only (for the most part) omitted; they are also depicted as *irrelevant* to the workman's interest in and intentions for them. Whether they are interested in or even capable of sexual relations with humans is entirely irrelevant to his own interest to "fuck [them] or die trying." In the Keats poem, as I noted earlier, the Belle Dame's interests are likewise irrelevant. Indeed, it is *only* the irrelevance of her own interests and viewpoint that could possibly justify the attribution to her of *mercilessness* in her treatment of the knight (given what we are told about their relationship to and with each other, anyway). We might be tempted to follow Cahill at this juncture and say that the reason why the interests and desires of the aliens and the faery woman are irrelevant to the males in these fictions is that the males see them as mere extensions of their own interests and desires. But that is only one among several possible explanations for what is going on; and so I think that, in diagnosing what is problematic about the males' attitudes toward the aliens and the faery woman, we should focus more on the fact that their viewpoints are irrelevant to the males rather than on our speculations about why that fact obtains.

In light of all this, I propose that attitudinal and representational sexual objectification essentially include regarding or representing someone in a way that *discourages normatively appropriate levels of empathetic attention to or identification with the interests and desires of the subject*. This is only a necessary condition on sexual objectification, not a sufficient condition. But it is the condition that, in the present context, I am most interested in defending and that I think is most central to the nature of objectification. We get closer to a sufficient condition if we add that (i) sexual objectification includes regarding or representing someone in a sexual way—that is, in a way that is meant to *encourage* sexual interest in or desire for the subject—and (ii) the sexually encouraging aspects of the representation contribute to or arise out of the ways in which the representation discourages empathy and identification with the genuine interests and desires of the subject. But arriving at a fully sufficient condition would require attention to complexities that are beyond the scope of the present article.

I include the reference to *normatively appropriate levels* of empathetic attention to or identification with the subject's interests and desires because not every instance of discouraging empathetic attention to or identification with someone's interests and desires is objectifying. For example, imagine a literary character who is intentionally portrayed as having extremely perverse interests and desires, yet who is, contrary to the author's intentions, deeply sexually interesting to a small portion of the fiction's audience. In this case we might think that the overall portrayal is such as to *discourage* empathetic identification with the subject's

interests and desires—by virtue of the portrayal of those desires as extremely perverse—while at the same time *encouraging*, in some readers anyway, sexual interest in the subject. Is the character objectified? One wants to say no. This is partly because the sexual portrayal of the character is both inadvertent and relativized to a small portion of the expected audience; but it is also because, as the case is described, there is nothing normatively inappropriate about the degree to which empathetic attention to and identification with the character’s interests and desires is being discouraged.²⁸ By contrast, one of the main problems with paradigmatically pornographic representations of women is that, even if the representations encourage some degree of engagement or identification with the subject’s interests and desires, they discourage viewers from having a normatively appropriate degree of empathetic attention to and identification with the subject’s interests and desires.

This characterization of objectification does justice, I think, to familiar glosses on objectification—for example, that objectifying representations or attitudes are dehumanizing, portray the objectified subject as a mere thing, and so on. It also resonates in important ways with Cahill’s notion of derivatization insofar as representations that discourage normatively appropriate levels of empathetic attention to or identification with the subject’s interests and desires will often enough also be aptly described as treating their subjects as reflections or projections of the viewer’s or creator’s interests and desires. Moreover, my characterization is clearly in the neighborhood of Kathleen Stock’s (2018) understanding of objectification as involving “mind-suppression” or “mind-insensitive seeing-as.” To see or represent someone in a way that discourages empathetic attention to their interests and desires is to see or represent them *as* an individual whose interests and desires are in a certain way irrelevant or not to be engaged or otherwise taken into account. This is a kind of mind-suppression, just not quite of the sort that Stock seems to envision. Stock acknowledges that mind-suppression comes in degrees (2018, 302), so she is not to be understood as suggesting that objectifying representations or the “mind-insensitive seeing-as” that is encouraged by such representations are *wholly* mind-suppressing or mind-insensitive. But, in contrast to my characterization, the core idea underlying her discussion seems to be that objectification works by *categorically* discouraging attention to certain aspects of the subject’s mind. The difference between my view and Stock’s, then, lies primarily in the fact that my view accommodates, in a way in which hers does not, the idea that sexual objectification sometimes works by simultaneously *encouraging* one kind of attention to or engagement with certain aspects of the subject’s mind while

²⁸I am indebted to Elizabeth Barnes for comments that helped me to see this complication.

at the same time discouraging another kind of attention to or engagement with *those very same aspects* of her mind. When this happens, the kind of attention to and engagement with relevant aspects of the subject's mind that is encouraged is at least partly sexual, and what is simultaneously discouraged (according to my account) is empathetic attention and identification.

I take it that the notion of *empathetic attention* to someone's interests and desires is reasonably well understood, but the notion of *identification* with someone's interests deserves brief comment. As I understand it, identifying with someone's interests and desires is a matter of taking on those interests and desires in some way as one's own—perhaps not to the same degree as one's own, but at least in appropriate balance with them. This is not the same thing as treating another person, or the humanity in another person, “as an end rather than as a means.” As I understand it, the latter is primarily a matter of respecting their personhood, treating them, qua human being, as intrinsically valuable, and in some sense taking their flourishing as one of your own ends.²⁹ But all of this can be done in ways that are wholly uninformed by—and, indeed, even at odds with—the person's actual interests and desires (even their *good* interests and desires). For exactly the same reason, identifying with someone else's interests and desires is not the same as *desiring their good* or *working to further their good*; for one might do these things, too, in ways that are wholly uninformed by or perhaps even at odds with the person's actual interests or good.

Notably, my characterization of objectification nicely handles the various problem cases above. Objectifying images are often mind-suppressing in precisely the sense identified by Stock, discouraging even attention to, much less identification with, the interests and desires of the subject. But, on my account, the addition of captions or bios describing or in other ways encouraging attention to the subject's interests and desires would negate the otherwise objectifying character of the images in question only if it somehow managed to negate the features of the overall context that *discourage empathetic attention to and identification* with those interests and desires. Thus my account allows that representations might objectify even while positively encouraging certain kinds of attention to the subject's interests and desires. By contrast, my account implies that the sex worker's diary is *not* objectifying precisely because the diary context of her remarks encourages rather than discourages engagement and identification with her interests and desires. My account entirely bypasses concerns about the distinction between objects and mere objects by not relying on that distinction. And, finally, although viewing someone in a way that discourages empathetic attention to or identification with their interests and desires will often presuppose or lead to viewing them as an

²⁹ Cf. Korsgaard (1986).

object appropriately dominated, it need not do so—as the cases of Tiptree’s aliens and Keats’s faery woman make clear. Thus, my account explains, in a way in which rival accounts do not, how it is that the aliens and the faery woman and femmes fatale more generally can be objectified despite occupying positions of power in relation to their objectifiers.

I acknowledge that the idea of a representation or attitude *encouraging* or *discouraging* some kind of attention to or engagement with a person’s interests and desires is a bit murky. But, as is evident from my discussion of Kathleen Stock’s views, it is an idea already present and put to substantial work in the literature on objectification. Moreover, I submit that it is no less murky than the idea that representations might do any of a variety of other things that they are said to do in the literature on objectification: for example, *presenting* a person as being for a certain purpose, *denying* some aspect or other of their nature or personhood, *reducing* them to something or other, and so on.

Finally, I think my characterization sheds helpful light on the relationship between objectification and one thing that many feminists have wanted to insist that objectifying representations of women do—namely, *silence* them. Discouraging empathetic attention to and identification with the interests of women as they appear in pornographic and other objectifying representations plausibly discourages such engagement and identification with women’s interests more generally. In doing so, it thereby discourages wonder about, inquiry into, and uptake of a certain important range of women’s mental states. Such discouragement does not, of course, guarantee failure of uptake in communicative contexts, so I see no reason to go so far as to say that objectifying representations always result in the form of silencing that Ishani Maitra (2009) calls “communicative disablement.” But it does put up a kind of obvious communicative *obstacle*, in just the way that intellectual arrogance or obtuseness is an obstacle to updating one’s information about the world more generally. And it seems to me that the raising of such obstacles does plausibly deserve to be called *silencing*.

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