

Trashing & tribalism in the gender wars

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‘...I have been watching for years with increasing dismay as the Movement consciously destroys anyone within it who stands out in any way. I had long hoped that this self-destructive tendency would wither away with time and experience. Thus I sympathized with, supported, but did not speak out about, the many women whose talents have been lost to the Movement because their attempts to use them had been met with hostility. ... [But] the Movement has not learned from its unexamined experience. Instead, trashing has reached epidemic proportions. Perhaps taking it out of the closet will clear the air’ (Freeman 1976).

Abstract

In 1976, Jo Freeman wrote an article for *Ms. Magazine*, entitled ‘Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood’. It provoked an outpouring of letters from women relating their own experiences of trashing during the course of the second wave feminist movement—more letters than *Ms.* had received about any previous article. Since then, the technology has improved but the climate among feminists has not; trashing is now conducted on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, in front of ever-larger audiences and with the magnified opportunities for destruction that these new platforms bring with them. Women already experience disproportionate harassment on social media; many feel trashing by other feminists to be much harder to accept. It’s one thing for people to hate feminists; resistance from those for whom a social justice movement represents a threat is par for the course. But it’s something else for feminists to hate each other. These are people with shared goals and a common enemy. What are the psychological mechanisms underlying this fact of life for feminist activists? Various explanations might be offered, from internalised misogyny, through volatility caused by histories of oppression, through envy and competitiveness, through ideological purity policing. Which are correct? Is the hatred that motivates trashing within feminism the same in quality and quantity, or different, from the affective dynamics inside other social movements? How does tribalism between warring feminist factions contribute to these dynamics, and to what extent is trashing underwritten by laudable moral goals (such as anti-elitism and anti-hierarchy) even when it goes too far or misfires? Can a liberation movement be successful without ideological purity policing, or is there a tension between achieving social justice outcomes and facilitating a healthy amount of disagreement and constructive criticism within a group? In this paper I’ll focus on potential explanations of the phenomena of trashing, including tribalism, power grabs, and purity policing; and the moral commitments that might lead feminists to trash each other.

1. Sisterhood is powerful. It kills. Mostly sisters.¹

Kathleen Lowrey is one of the more recent feminist women to have been ‘cancelled’, dismissed from her position as undergraduate programs chair and subject to intense criticism online. In a recent account, she writes ‘I will start with what was most personally distressing about this experience. Almost all of my most enthusiastic public attackers were feminist academic women... many of whom I had known and been friendly with for years’.² Lowrey’s observation is that what played out in her case was largely a matter *between* feminist women. *Cancelling* is a broad social phenomena that is not sex-specific. *Trashing* is the more specific phenomena that refers to what happened to Lowrey.³

In 1976, Jo Freeman wrote an article for *Ms. magazine*, titled ‘Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood’. She told the stories of her trashings, attacks by other women in the feminist movement on ‘[her] character, [her] commitment, and [her] very self’.⁴ This was the essay that bought trashing, as a concept, into the mainstream among feminists. Freeman reports that the article ‘evoked more letters from readers than any article previously published in *Ms.*, all but a few relating their own experiences

¹ The phrase ‘Sisterhood Is Powerful’ was coined by Kathie Sarachild in 1968; the longer ‘Sisterhood is powerful. It kills. Mostly sisters’ was used by Ti-Grace Atkinson in her resignation from The Feminists (a New York feminist group that she had founded). See discussion in (Faludi 2013) & (Filipovic 2013).

² (Lowrey 2021, p. 757).

³ Lowrey herself does not explain what happened in terms of trashing, nor focus much on the between-women aspect of it, after noting it. Her explanation is that this is part of a ‘New Ptolemaism’ in universities. Ptolemaism involves ‘an inordinately complex model’ that makes ‘all of the empirical data conform to a central, organizing false assumption’ (Lowrey 2021, p. 757). The ‘New Ptolemaism’ involves the flipping of hierarchical binaries; in the case that impacted Lowrey herself, flipping sex and gender. But this is an explanation more in line with that offered by the critics of critical theory, who see a certain approach being implemented across a range of areas relating to ‘identity’ (e.g. Pluckrose & Lindsay 2020). So I will set Lowrey’s explanation aside in what follows.

⁴ (Freeman 1976). Archived at <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm>, no page numbers.

of being trashed'.⁵ Clearly she hit a raw nerve, and created an impulse among the women in the movement to say *yes, this happened to me!* and more importantly, *what is it about? Why is this happening?*⁶

On Freeman's own account, trashing is not merely disagreement, conflict, or opposition. Rather, it is 'a particularly vicious form of character assassination', that is 'manipulative, dishonest, and excessive', and is done not with the motivation of exposing disagreement and resolving differences, but in order 'to disparage and destroy'. It is a behaviour that comes from hatred, contempt, anger,⁷ or other negative emotions between women. It is worth quoting Freeman's examples of the tactics used to trash at length:

'Trashing can be done privately or in a group situation; to one's face or behind one's back; through ostracism or open denunciation. The trasher may give you false reports of what (horrible things) others think of you; tell your friends false stories of what you think of them; interpret whatever you say or do in the most negative light; project unrealistic expectations on you so that when you fail to meet them, you become a "legitimate" target for anger; deny your perceptions of reality; or pretend you don't exist at all.'⁸

One of the revelations of Freeman's essay is the confusion that trashing causes women in the feminist movement. Despite previous experience with political conflict, it got under her skin. She says it took her years to understand why. Her conclusion is that 'the Movement seduced me by its sweet promise of sisterhood. It claimed to provide a haven from the ravages of a sexist society; a place where one would be understood. It was my very need for feminism and feminists that made me vulnerable. I gave the movement the right to judge me because I trusted it. And when it judged me worthless, I accepted that judgement'.⁹

Feminist trashing hit Freeman hard, as it still hits some women hard today, because it comes from a source not only not expected, but so dissonant with women's expectations that it is hard to believe or understand. Women are implored by feminism to choose women, to fight for women; and yet when they do, they are attacked by women, and betrayed by women. Mary Daly, in her canonical book *Gyn/Ecology*, talks about women being 'woman-identified', 'choos[ing] to be present to each other'¹⁰, saying 'no' to men and 'yes' to women.¹¹ Janice Raymond declared in *A Passion For Friends* that 'The best feminist politics proceeds from a shared friendship'.¹² Andrea Dworkin describes the achievement of consciousness-raising groups during the second wave, writing that 'Women discovered each other, for truly no oppressed group had ever been so divided and conquered'.¹³ It may be perplexing that members of *any* social justice movement to treat each other badly, but it is *particularly* perplexing for this to happen within feminism, the whole point of which is for women to stand for women.

Freeman herself became convinced, over time and after hearing from countless movement women about their experiences, that 'trashing was not an individual problem brought on by individual actions; nor was it a result of political conflicts between those of different ideas; it was a social disease'.¹⁴ It arose from the feminist movement's commitment to the ideal of 'sisterhood', which said that every woman was a sister. The reality of dislike and other complicated dynamics between individual women made them unable to conform to the ideal of sisterhood by *treating* all women as sisters. The ideal forced the behaviour underground, which at least partly explained its subtlety and perniciousness.

Is Freeman right about what explains trashing? Is it the impossibility of living up to the ideal of 'sisterhood' that creates hatred between women¹⁵ in the feminist movement? Or is there a better

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ There are many individual testimonies from women about their own experiences of trashing in Phyllis Chesler's book *Women's Inhumanity to Women* (Chesler 2001).

⁷ For a discussion of some of the more positive uses of anger inside feminist organizing, drawing on examples from the New Zealand second wave, see (Holmes 2004).

⁸ (Freeman 1976); see also (Dell-Olio, *nd.*) for a similar description.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ (Daly 1988, p. *xii*).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. *xiii*.

¹² (Raymond 1986, p. 9).

¹³ (Dworkin 1974, p. 20).

¹⁴ (Freeman 1976).

¹⁵ Let me be completely clear that when I say 'between women' here, I mean 'between *some* women'. While it seems that many if not most feminist women experience trashing, it's not remotely the case that all feminist women trash or that feminist women are trashed by all or most of the feminist women they know. (Freeman agrees with this when she says 'Although only a few women actually engage in trashing, the blame for allowing it to continue rests with us all'—see Freeman 1976). There are

explanation to be had? That question will be the focus of this paper. I'll present a range of potential explanations, some offered already in the literature and some new, and assess their plausibility. Along the way I'll be trying to work out whether trashing is a *novel* phenomenon, unique to feminist movement, or a feature of any social justice movement, or indeed, just a feature of social life.¹⁶

2. Women hating women

I'll discuss eleven independent explanations of trashing, all of which are competitors to Freeman's explanation (although which need not be exclusive to it). These are i) tribalism, ii) anti-hierarchy, iii) internalised misogyny, iv) misdirected rage, v) unresolved trauma, vi) who's attracted to feminism, vii) status hierarchies / power grabs, viii) overzealous moralism, ix) performative moralism, x) resentment, and xi) feminine socialisation / expected social roles. Then I'll return to Freeman's explanation: xii) the ideal of sisterhood. Any of these might explain particular instances of trashing, and any combination might overdetermine or exacerbate it in a particular feminist community.

i. Tribalism

Freeman described being subjected to a particularly nasty form of trashing, a behaviour we now call 'gaslighting', in her case having others deny that they are mistreating her while in fact mistreating her, causing her to doubt her own sanity. She writes 'One woman, in private phone conversations, did admit that I was being poorly treated. But she never supported me publicly, and admitted quite frankly that it was because *she feared to lose the group's approval*. She too was trashed in another group'.¹⁷ Women who disapprove of how a member is being treated are here unwilling to do anything about it, lest they find themselves at odds with the group, too.

bell hooks makes a similar point about group dynamics within feminism. She wrote that 'many splinter groups who share common identities (e.g., the WASP working class, white academic faculty women, anarchist feminists, etc.)... endeavour to support, affirm, and protect one another while demonstrating hostility (usually through excessive trashing) towards women outside the chosen sphere'.¹⁸ And she goes on to say that this is nothing new: 'Bonding among a chosen circle of women who strengthen their ties by excluding and devaluing women outside their group closely resembles the type of personal bonding among women that has always occurred under patriarchy—the one difference being the interest in feminism'.¹⁹ hooks locates this behaviour among *women* but not among *feminists* in particular. The latter is just a version of the former.

If tribalism is the explanation of trashing, then trashing may not have very much to do with the particular woman being trashed. Rather, how she is treated is simply a *signal* to others, its primary purpose being the redrawing of in-group/out-group lines, and a communication of loyalty and allegiance to the in-group. Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood²⁰ discuss the signalling effect of adherence to particular norms. (Their discussion is instructive here whether we run it through norms or not. For example, we might say there's a *norm* for this feminist group to trash that one, e.g. during the second wave, for lesbian separatist feminists to trash heterosexual feminists;²¹ or we might set norms to the side and simply ask, what is signalled by individual lesbian separatist feminists when they trash heterosexual feminists?)

They talk about 'a teenager who dresses in black, dyes her hair, and wears skull jewellery'.²² In doing so, she signals belonging to the group who dress that way; first emphasizing her similarity to others

many positive relationships among feminist women not characterized by any of the negative emotions I'm focusing on here. It's important to say this given the prevalence of the 'catfight' narrative in understanding relationships between women, feminist women being no exception. For criticism of this narrative in the context of the series *Mrs. America* (2020), see (Brown 2020).

¹⁶ Cf. (Lorde 1984, pp. 135-136), who suggests there was a similar dynamic in the 1960s black community in the United States.

¹⁷ (Freeman 1976), my emphasis.

¹⁸ (hooks 2000, p. 47).

¹⁹ (hooks 2000, p. 47).

²⁰ (Brennan et al. 2013).

²¹ By 'heterosexual feminists' here I mean *practising* heterosexuals, so, non-separatist feminists. This dispute, originating during the second wave and still lingering in some quarters today, was about the practice of interacting with men—romantically, sexually, or in any other ways—rather than devoting one's energies to women alone, and not about the bare fact of one's sexual orientation. (The latter was treated with more scepticism than it is today, at least when the orientation was 'heterosexual', given that feminine socialisation was taken to include socialisation into heterosexuality, and feminine socialisation was seen as the mechanism by which women—female people—were oppressed).

²² (Brennan et al. 2013, p. 158).

in the group, which is a signal to them, and second emphasizing her difference from those outside the group or in the ‘mainstream’, which may have the effect of cutting her off from them. This makes her signal act as a credible commitment: ‘Were she able to go off and interact with someone else instead whenever the group tried sanctioning her, there would be a real risk that she might betray the group. Sending a credible signal of her affiliation with the group that at the same time makes it hard for her to leave the group makes her a more trustworthy member of it’.²³

We can say exactly the same thing about trashing. When a lesbian separatist publicly trashes a heterosexual feminist, she doesn’t *only* attack that particular woman. She also sends a signal. The signal goes back to her own in-group, the lesbian feminists, and emphasizes the fact of her belonging, and it goes out to all of the out-groups, not only the heterosexual feminists but everyone else too. The heterosexual feminists in particular will be likely to ‘cut her off’ for this behaviour, and this ensures that she cannot go to them when the lesbian feminists attempt to sanction her. The same may be true of other feminists groups adjacent in values to the heterosexual feminists. This in turn makes her a more reliable member of the lesbian feminist group.²⁴

In-groups built out of identities may be even more at risk for trashing based in tribalism. Writing for *The Guardian*, Jill Filipovic speculates that ‘identity-based movements may be particularly susceptible, precisely because of our personal investment in them’.²⁵ She identified feminism as one such movement, saying ‘Feminism isn’t just a general ideology for making the world a better place: it’s a very specific ideology of liberation for the actors of the movement. It’s personal by definition. Challenges to the movement, or the sense that other women are somehow doing feminism wrong, can feel like personal affronts. For feminists, your work often feels like a reflection of who you are, and the critiques even more so’.²⁶ This is still group-based, because it’s about *we, women*, but the explanation is that our personal investment in the movement explains our sensitivity to criticism, or to others’ differing approaches, and that this in turn may at least partially explain the extravagance of our negative treatment of one another.

ii. Anti-hierarchy

The Redstockings, a radical feminist group based in New York, wrote in their 1969 manifesto ‘We are committed to achieving internal democracy. We will do whatever is necessary to ensure that every woman in our movement has an equal chance to participate, assume responsibility, and develop her political potential’.²⁷ Democracy here was seen as the opposite of hierarchy, and a reaction to it, a commitment to doing things differently, and better.

It was a noble goal; but the feminist commitment to anti-hierarchy seems to have had some undesirable effects. Freeman quotes a speech by Anselma dell’Olio read at the Congress to Unite Women, where she talks about the personal attacks she witnessed in the feminist movement, including character assassinations and purging women from the movement entirely. dell’Olio says:

‘...and whom do they attack? Generally two categories—some women are unlucky to fall into both—achievement or accomplishment of any kind would seem to be the worst crime.’ ... ‘Do anything, in short, that every other woman secretly or otherwise feels she could do just as well—and baby, watch out, because you’re in for it.’

‘If you are in the first category (an achiever) you are immediately labelled a thrill-seeking opportunist, a ruthless mercenary, out to get her fame and fortune over the dead bodies of selfless sisters who have buried their abilities and sacrificed their ambitions for the greater glory of Feminism. Productivity seems to be the major crime—but if you have the misfortune of being outspoken and articulate, you are accused of being power-mad, elitist, fascist, and finally the worst epithet of all: A MALE-IDENTIFIER, AAARRGGG!’²⁸

dell’Olio describes the phenomenon colloquially referred to as ‘tall poppy syndrome’; when an individual excels at something, others feel the need to ‘cut her down to size’ in order to restore equality. While equality is important, the feminist movement will be handicapping itself if it suppresses

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁴ A similar insight has been put forward in the discussion of slurs, with Geoff Nunberg suggesting that the use of a slur may be more about signalling in-group solidarity than it is about the individual or group being slurred (Nunberg 2017).

²⁵ (Filipovic 2013).

²⁶ (Filipovic 2013).

²⁷ (Redstockings 1969).

²⁸ dell’Olio, no date provided, circa 1970s. Also quoted in (Freeman 1976). I present the same passages Freeman quotes, but from dell’Olio’s original mimeograph. There are some minor differences in the wording.

achievement and accomplishment in feminist women, traits that could be better used to drive the movement forward. Phyllis Chesler writes that she's sure trashing has driven away many talented women from feminism. She wrote of the early second wave that 'individual petty jealousies and leaderless group bullying were frightening and ugly. Mean girls envied and destroyed excellence and talent. In short, they ate their most gifted leaders'.²⁹

Nancy Hartsock quotes dell'Olio from the passages above to make the point that leadership qualities in women have been confused, by women in the feminist movement, with that woman *wanting to be a leader*, and this in turn has been interpreted as her having the desire to dominate others. Firm commitments against hierarchy and domination then lead movement women to reject any women who have leadership qualities. Hartsock criticizes this practice, saying 'women have not recognized that power understood as energy, strength, and effective interaction need not be the same as power that requires the domination of others in the movement'.³⁰

It is perfectly comprehensible why there would be a strong reaction among feminist women to a perceived trait of desire for domination. Some feminists saw feminism as a microcosm for wider society, an 'experiment in living' working out ways to live according to different values than characterized the mainstream.³¹ The domination of women by men was one of the central problems identified by feminists, a problem which they worked to find ways to challenge. It is therefore not surprising that there would be sensitivity about the presence of domination within feminist communities. The problem, of course, comes when domination is misdiagnosed, because it is confused with traits that have superficial commonalities with it, but are ultimately constructive (as leadership is).

And regardless of feminist women's propensity to confuse leadership qualities with a desire for domination, there is still a question of the best way to eliminate domination (i.e. *even if* that was what it was). It might be more constructive for the group to discuss its concerns with a particular feminist woman and to try to negotiate with her from a place of mutual respect, rather than to simply trash her in the hope that she is either shamed into submission or drops out of the movement entirely.

iii. *Internalised misogyny*

Misogyny is hatred of women, or at least, hatred of women who are not 'good women'—women who conform to sex-based norms for what a woman should be like.³² Andrea Dworkin wrote in *Woman-Hating*, published almost fifty years ago, that women 'have begun to understand the extraordinary violence that has been done to us, that is being done to us: how our minds are aborted in their development by sexist education; how our bodies are violated by oppressive grooming imperatives; how the police function against us in cases of rape and assault; how the media, schools, and churches conspire to deny us dignity and freedom; how the nuclear family and ritualized sexual behaviour imprison us in roles and forms which are degrading to us'.³³ She says that through consciousness-raising groups 'we [women] began to see ourselves clearly, and what we saw was dreadful'.³⁴ In a world full of cultural messaging about the inferiority of women relative to men, and where important institutions are marked by sex discrimination (e.g. the low rates of prosecution for rape that Dworkin mentions, which remains the case today), it is hardly surprising that women themselves may have internalized woman-hate.

Audre Lorde, writing about the civil rights struggle, says that in any move for liberation, 'we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves'.³⁵ This is an important point: a people that has been oppressed does not face only external pressure, from outsiders who treat them badly, but also faces internal pressure, because individuals will to some extent have *internalised* outsiders' ideas about themselves. We have to reject the views of outsiders *and* reconceive ourselves. She writes:

"If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppressions is not enough. In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us – that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it. And we must

²⁹ (Chesler 2018, p. 183).

³⁰ (Hartsock 1974), quoted in (hooks 2000, p. 91).

³¹ See (Mackay 2017), and discussion in (Lawford-Smith *forthcoming*, Chapter 1).

³² (Manne 2017) argues against the former and for the latter understanding of misogyny.

³³ (Dworkin 1974, p. 20).

³⁴ (Dworkin 1974, p. 21).

³⁵ (Lorde 1984, p. 135).

fight that inserted piece of self-destruction that lives and flourishes like a poison inside of us, unexamined until it makes us turn upon ourselves in each other. But we can put our finger down upon that loathing buried deep within each one of us and see who it encourages us to despise, and we can lessen its potency by the knowledge of our real connectedness, arcing across our differences”.³⁶

If we don’t do that, we are at risk of treating each other the way that outsiders treat us, and thereby being a perpetrator of our own group’s oppression. Could this be the explanation of trashing—the simple idea that feminist women are treating each other with contempt and disrespect following cultural cues about how it is appropriate to treat women?

Freeman dismisses this explanation of trashing as ‘facile’,³⁷ saying ‘it obscures the fact that trashing does not occur randomly’. She says it’s more common in some feminist groups than others, and that this needs an explanation and makes general group self-hatred insufficient. She says ‘it is much more prevalent among those who call themselves radical than among those who don’t; among those who stress personal changes than among those who stress institutional ones; among those who can see no victories short of revolution than among those who can be satisfied with smaller successes; and among those in groups with vague goals than those in groups with concrete ones’.³⁸

I am not aware of any empirical research on trashing that would back up this claim of Freeman’s, although it is an intriguing claim and would have interesting implications if true. We can accept that this is what she observed at the time, without accepting that it is an accurate characterization of the dynamics across the whole feminist movement. Without confirmation of those differences, the objection is highly speculative. So I will leave internalised misogyny on the table as an explanation of trashing.

iv. Misdirected rage

In a talk given at the Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard University in 1982, Lorde quoted Malcolm X having said he had ‘begun to discuss those scars of oppression which lead us to war against ourselves in each other rather than against our enemies’.³⁹ This same phrase, ‘ourselves in each other’, showed up in the quote from Lorde in *iii.*, ‘self-destruction... makes us turn upon ourselves in each other’. What did Malcolm X mean by it?

Lorde understands it as referring to ‘those closest to us who mirrored our own impotence’.⁴⁰ As members of an oppressed group, we lack power in particular ways, and we see this clearly in each other in a way that reflects back to us what we are most frustrated about in our own situation. And because we are *right there* while those who oppress us are not, the anger and frustration that we feel about what we see can easily be directed at those from our own groups, rather than at those who cause our group’s marginalization. Instead, Lorde says, we must ‘focus our rage for change upon our enemies rather than upon each other’.⁴¹

This phenomenon is distinct from internalised misogyny, because it is one thing to hate other women *because they are women* (or because they are not ‘good women’), another to hate them because they are similarly impotent in the face of oppression, and conveniently right there, available to be the recipients of other women’s frustration.

In Lorde’s view, we spare each other from misdirected rage by knowing who the ‘we’ is. For feminist women, this means knowing who *women* are. This allows us to ‘use our energies with greater precision against our enemies rather than against ourselves’.⁴² When feminist women are clear in the knowledge that we stand for women, we will make sure that we don’t spend our time attacking women,

³⁶ (Lorde 1984, p. 142).

³⁷ She’s not responding to Lorde, whose talk came later, but anticipating Lorde’s *type* of explanation and rejecting it.

³⁸ (Freeman 1976).

³⁹ (Lorde 1984, p. 135). She gave this explanation, and the one discussed in *iii.*, in the course of explaining infighting in black communities in the 1980s. I’m applying her reasoning to women in *iii.* and *iv.*

⁴⁰ (Lorde 1984, pp. 135-136).

⁴¹ (Lorde 1984, p. 135).

⁴² (Lorde 1984, p. 137).

and rather focus on those who are the enemies of women⁴³ (or that which is the enemy of women, when the ‘enemy’ is structural or institutional).⁴⁴

Is trashing just misdirected rage, and something that could be ameliorated with a clear understanding of who feminists are *for* and who/what they are *against*? It’s not clear whether the latter would resolve trashing per se, although it might transform trashing (a phenomenon between women) into cancelling (a general phenomenon, that would in this case be between women and men). That is to say, we might shift the target of the rage without changing how that rage is expressed. If Lorde’s claim is just that it is better for the target to be ‘the oppressor’ than one’s fellow oppressed, then that might be right. But if the question is *why is there trashing at all, and how do we get rid of it, because it’s horrible*, then the proposed solution might not help much. Misdirected rage does seem a useful explanation though, in terms of capturing the otherwise perplexing phenomena of highly acrimonious in-fighting over very small differences, rather than directing rage at bigger and what would seem to be more threatening differences. (A current example is the trashing of gender critical feminists by mainstream feminists, when surely anti-feminists are the much more important enemy).⁴⁵

Freeman also favours misdirected rage as an explanation of trashing (although she ‘doubt[s] that there is any single explanation to trashing’).⁴⁶ She says ‘I have never seen women get as angry at other women as they do in the Movement. In part this is because our expectations of other feminists and the Movement in general are very high, and thus difficult to meet. We have not yet learned to be realistic in our demands on our sisters and ourselves. *It is also because other feminists are available as targets for rage*’.⁴⁷ She explains that rage is a logical response to oppression, and that it needs an outlet, but that outlet cannot be men, because women have learned that when they direct rage at men they can be hurt. Men are distant, ‘the system’ is vague, but women are near. Thus ‘their rage is often turned inward’. Freeman says that this can create a sense of power, a feeling of having ‘done something’, because trashing hurts women and those women often leave the movement.⁴⁸ She speculates that this will be especially appealing to women who focus on revolution rather than reform, because they are less likely to have the feeling of having ‘done something’ in the course of ordinary activism.

v. Unresolved trauma

According to the World Health Organization, 35% of women worldwide have experienced intimate partner violence, or sexual violence.⁴⁹ To give some detail on just one country, in Australia, the greatest contributor to the disease burden for women between 18 and 44 years old is male intimate partner violence.⁵⁰ Australian women, in significant numbers, have experienced physical violence (34%), sexual

⁴³ The exception, of course, will be the case in which certain *women* are enemies of women, e.g. in advocating for policies which harm women’s interests. Just as knowing who the ‘we’ is in the case of the black community wouldn’t preclude fighting against black people who genuinely worked against black interests, knowing who the ‘we’ is in the case of the community of women wouldn’t preclude fighting against women who genuinely worked against women’s interests. The trick is to have a broad enough understanding of ‘women’s interests’ that it permits disagreement (reasonable pluralism) among women about feminism, rather than justifying attacks against anyone who doesn’t have our specific feminist view. The latter would risk justifying the trashing-filled status quo.

⁴⁴ Freeman (1976) makes a similar point about locating the real enemy. She writes: ‘the collective cost of allowing trashing to go on as long and as extensively as we have is enormous. We have already lost some of the most creative minds and dedicated activists in the Movement. More importantly, we have discouraged many feminists from stepping out, out of fear that they, too, would be trashed. We have not provided a supportive environment for everyone to develop their individual potential, or in which to gather strength for the battles with the sexist institutions we must meet each day. A Movement that once burst with energy, enthusiasm, and creativity has become bogged down in basic survival -- survival from each other. Isn’t it time we stopped looking for enemies within and began to attack the real enemy without?’

⁴⁵ Gender critical feminism is an emerging feminist theory and movement that attempts to reorient feminism back to a focus on women as a sex caste, and work for the protection of women’s sex-based rights. See discussion in (Lawford-Smith *forthcoming*).

⁴⁶ (Freeman 1976). dell’Olio seems to agree that there is misdirected rage, and puts the point rather more colourfully: ‘I learned 3 1/2 years ago that women had always been divided against one another, were self-destructive and filled with impotent rage. I thought the movement would change all that. I never dreamed that I would see the day when this rage, masquerading as a pseudo-egalitarian radicalism under the “pro-woman” banner, would turn into frighteningly vicious anti-intellectual fascism of the left, and used within the movement to strike down sisters singled out for punishment with all the subtlety and justice of a kangaroo court of the Ku Klux Klan’ (dell’Olio *n.d.*)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ (WHO 2013; cited in VicHealth 2017).

⁵⁰ (Webster 2016, cited in VicHealth 2017). Two clarifications will be helpful here. Male intimate partner violence means violence perpetrated by male partners of women, including dates, boyfriends, and current or ex- cohabiting partners

violence (19%), and physical and/or sexual violence from male perpetrators (39%). 10% of Australian women have experienced violence from male strangers (as opposed to men known to them), and 17% have been stalked by a man. 81% of the women who had experienced male violence in a 12-month period experienced more than one violent incident.⁵¹ One of the social and economic costs of violence against women is homelessness. 36% of the 92,000 people seeking assistance from government-funded homelessness agencies were fleeing domestic violence, and the estimated cost of the health impact on women is \$21.7 billion dollars a year.⁵² There is also female trauma not captured in these figures, associated with e.g. childhood sexual abuse, trauma associated with pregnancy (e.g. miscarriages and stillbirths), trauma associated with body image (anorexia, bulimia, cutting, anxiety, depression), and the impacts of workplace sexual harassment and bullying, and everyday sexism.

Why mention all of this? The underlying thought is that there is a serious cost to being a member of an oppressed group, a group that is—as women are—subject to exploitation, violence, and cultural imperialism⁵³ at the hands of men and male-dominated culture. People who have experienced trauma are carrying a high psychological and emotional (and sometimes physical) burden, and therefore may have less resources available to manage interpersonal conflict. They may have individual triggers that are hard for others to anticipate, or for them to know well enough to warn others of. Thus one explanation of trashing comes from the fact of women being members of an oppressed group in the first place. Reduced resources to manage conflict and greater numbers of triggers for that conflict may result in a tinder box -type situation for in-fighting.

If this explanation is accurate, then we should expect to see similar tensions in other oppressed groups, in particular those oppressed along race or class lines.⁵⁴ The explanation does not make trashing *unique* to feminism, unless there is more to be said about the specific shape this response to trauma takes in the context of women together attempting to work for liberation from their common oppression.

vi. Who's attracted to feminism

Chesler's description of feminism in her memoir *A Politically Correct Feminist* stands out because it gives an unflattering, albeit cheerful, description of the women in the feminist movement at the time:

'In our midst was the usual assortment of scoundrels, sadists, bullies, con artists, liars, loners, and incompetents, not to mention the high-functioning psychopaths, schizophrenics, manic depressives, and suicide artists. I loved them all'.⁵⁵

The subtitle of her book continues this theme: '*Creating a Movement with Bitches, Lunatics, Dykes, Prodigies, Warriors, and Wonder Women*'.⁵⁶ Like *v.*, this offers us an explanation of trashing that is 'upstream' from feminism itself. Here, it's not about the content of feminist theory or movement, or about women as an oppressed group, or about between- and within-group dynamics. Rather, it's about the individuals who tend to be *attracted to* feminist activism in the first place. If feminist movement attracts some number of women who are especially volatile in interpersonal interactions, then this may explain both the quantity and quality of trashing within the feminist movement.

We can strengthen Chesler's observation by thinking about the alternative motivations women might have for participation in feminist activism, quite aside from a simple commitment to the cause of feminism itself. Women might come to feminist activism looking for new friends, new lovers, companionship, a sense of belonging, a shared understanding of negative life experiences (e.g. male violence), a new interest/hobby, excitement (e.g. participating in civil disobedience or protests),⁵⁷ and

(VicHealth 2017, p. 5). The 'disease burden' refers to 'the combined toll of illness, disability and premature death' (VicHealth 2017, p. 11). The negative impacts on women's health of intimate partner violence include poor mental health, particularly anxiety and depression, alcohol and drug use, suicide, injuries, and homicide (Ayre et al. 2016; Webster 2016; both cited in VicHealth 2017, p. 11).

⁵¹ (VicHealth 2017, p. 7).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵³ These are three of 'five faces' of oppression, according to one understanding of oppression (Young 2014).

⁵⁴ These groups are the most similar to sex in that they involved—historically, and to some extent still—an extraction of resources from the oppressed to the oppressor. For this conception of oppression see (Atkinson 1974, p. 110).

⁵⁵ (Chesler 2018, p. 3).

⁵⁶ (Chesler 2018, front cover).

⁵⁷ There is some discussion of the excitement motivation for participating in social movement in (Collins 2009, pp. 29-30).

more. Because these are personal motivations, it can be personally disappointing when things don't work out as anticipated.

Imagine that a small group of women get together to push back against proposed legislation, working on coordinating meetings with members of parliament, opinion pieces for the media, and a public awareness-raising sticker campaign. Suppose that all the women except one are there because they oppose the law, and their standard of success is strong resistance to the law, while one woman is there to make new friends. Conflict within the group may be harder for this last woman to deal with, because it is more personally disappointing to her if the relationships do not develop in the direction she had hoped they would. Similarly, a woman who seeks a sense of belonging may be distressed by a group dynamic in which she does not feel accepted or supported. Frustration, needing an outlet, may tip over into trashing.

Further, because feminist activism is generally antagonistic, certain personality traits will do better than others—people who are combative, argumentative, self-assured, and even aggressive will do well against *opponents* of feminism, and therefore advance the feminist cause, but those same personality traits may create interpersonal difficulties between movement women. It is important not to confuse conflict with abuse at this point, however—this explanation is compatible with high conflict, but high conflict can exist without trashing.⁵⁸ Disagreements need not be personal, but trashing is personal.

vii. Status hierarchies / power grabs

Trashing over issues of race within the Instagram knitting community made headlines in 2019. A knitting designer, Karen Templer, had written a blog post describing her longing to visit India, mentioning a friend from her youth who had offered for her to accompany the friend and her family on a trip there. Templer wrote 'To a suburban midwestern teenager with a severe anxiety disorder, that was like being offered a seat on a flight to Mars'.⁵⁹ Her blog filled up with angry comments accusing her of colonialism, imperialism, exploiting the emotional labour of her Indian friends, crying 'white women's tears', and 'othering'. As she responded to criticisms she was accused of being 'defensive and dismissive'. One Instagram knitting activist 'warned her white knitter friends that if they stayed silent and didn't speak up against racism then they would be considered "part of the problem"'.⁶⁰ Another knitter who spoke up against the mobbing of Templer, Maria Tusken, was then targeted, losing thousands of followers and having her livelihood directly targeted (the editor of a British knitting magazine tweeted 'don't be sucked in by her and people like her... Don't give them your money').⁶¹

James Lindsay, author of *Cynical Theories*, describes such activist campaigns as 'a power grab thinly clothed as a civil rights movement'.⁶² What this means is that people who have previously not had social power, or as much social power, are able to make a 'grab' for that power through the guise of social justice. A person of colour -knitter with fewer Instagram followers can call out a white knitter with greater numbers of Instagram followers, and by taking the position of the moral authority can gain new followers, and in cases where social media profile corresponds to small business success, can make more money. The same dynamics can play out when the rewards are not so quantifiable, too, for example in simply improving reputation or standing within a social group.

It is part of the history of women's oppression that women have been denied status and recognition; this may make women's groups more susceptible to power grabs, because power can be 'grabbed' more effectively from other women, where it is less secure, than from men, where it is more secure. (This is not to ignore the possibility of power grabs between men and women, it is simply to bracket it as less relevant to the theme of trashing). One of the rationales for women's spirituality during the second wave of feminism was to give women status and recognition, through formal roles like 'priestess', in recognition of what they had been denied by male-dominated society.⁶³

Jill Filipovic appears to agree with this idea, saying of trashing that '...it happens because we've internalised a narrative of scarcity: we act as though we're fighting for crumbs'.⁶⁴ She says that criticizing

⁵⁸ See discussion in (Schulman 2019).

⁵⁹ (Moore 2019).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See e.g. (Budapest 1980).

⁶⁴ (Filipovic 2013).

other feminists is ‘safe’; it allows women to position themselves as good feminists and to avoid becoming targets themselves in the way that they might if they put out new ideas. But she thinks this is ‘not because we’re catty or mean or somehow predisposed to cliquishness and competition. It’s because we’re starving’.⁶⁵ It is the predicament that women are in that creates the preconditions for trashing. If feminist women had the freedom to express themselves without becoming targets, there would, paradoxically, be less trashing.

viii. *Overzealous moralism*

Barbara Ryan, writing about second wave radical⁶⁶ feminists, noted that ‘volatile divisions’ developed around different feminist orientations: ‘separatist feminists accused heterosexual feminists of being male-identified; Marxist feminists charged that all women’s groups were bourgeois; socialist feminists considered radical, lesbian, and separatist feminists to be man-haters; and radical feminists dismissed women who continued to be associated with the organized (male controlled) left’.⁶⁷ She asks ‘why were the battles over ideological definitions and the emphasis on ideological purity so intense?’⁶⁸ The answer she offers depends on the importance of ideology to social movements more generally.

In Ryan’s view, multiple theories can contribute to the same overall ideology, but adherents of a particular theory can come to see it as definitive and this can create disputes over ideological purity. Who is committed to the superior theory? Who is the best feminist? Instead of taking a pluralist view of theory and focusing on a shared commitment to the same ideology, ‘the movement found itself with competitive models of “right thinking”’.⁶⁹ Ryan says that this was an inheritance of leftist groups: ‘Radical feminist women reacted against the male chauvinism they found in leftist groups of the 1960s era; nevertheless, they borrowed heavily from them, including the practice of promoting dogmatic positions on correct thinking’.⁷⁰ Commitments to specific theories were used as a means to creating feminist identities, which had the effect of separating feminist women from each other, and distancing them from ‘ordinary’ women.⁷¹ In Ryan’s view, feminists became ‘ideologues rather than social change agents’.⁷²

It’s not clear whether this is a more or less expected outcome of creating and disseminating theory and ideology, or whether ‘becoming ideologues’ was something that the second wave feminists fell into when they might have not done. If it’s the former, then we have an *explanation* of feminist in-fighting, in terms of adherence to a specific theory being confused for ideological disagreement, and policed as such. For example, the overall ideology of feminism might be centred on women’s liberation, and some women might theorize that as requiring legal reforms, others as requiring revolution. Then instead of taking a pluralistic approach—*we’re all working for the same overall goal*—women who subscribe to one theory or the other might decide that their theory is definitive, and so begin to confuse subscription to alternative theory with dissent from the overall ideology. *You work for legal reform, so you don’t really stand for women’s liberation.* But if it’s the latter, something that feminists might have avoided, by taking a more pluralistic approach, then we still don’t have an explanation of feminist in-fighting. We’ll need to know why the second wavers—and why feminists today—made this mistake, and why they let their ideological differences become a means to create their identities, rather than forming their identities in other ways, or relative to a broad and pluralistic commitment to advancing women’s equality or women’s liberation.

Randall Collins writes in the collection *Passionate Politics* that the kind of emotional solidarity that comes out of highly mobilized social movements creates feelings of morality. He writes ‘The... group generates its own standards of right and wrong. The highest good becomes commitment to the group and sacrifice of individual selfishness in its service; those who are outside the group, or worse yet,

⁶⁵ (Filipovic 2013).

⁶⁶ Note that her usage of ‘radical’ here only means not of the mass feminist movement. The mass movement was the National Organization of Women (NOW), who were reformers. Ryan considers radical feminists, socialist feminists, and separatist feminists, all under the umbrella of ‘radical feminist’. See (Ryan 2013, pp. 54-55).

⁶⁷ (Ryan 2013, pp. 55-56).

⁶⁸ (Ryan 2013, p. 60).

⁶⁹ (Ryan 2013, p. 61).

⁷⁰ (Ryan 2013, p. 61).

⁷¹ (Ryan 2013, p. 64).

⁷² (Ryan 2013, p. 64).

oppose it, are morally tagged as unworthy, evil, or inhuman'.⁷³ Emotions are amplified within collectives; feelings of outrage, anger, and fear grow much stronger.⁷⁴ On this explanation, trashing is a byproduct of the moral emotions, a response to the sense that out-groups are violating the in-group's standards of moral rightness. The sort of social sanctioning we might ordinarily reserve for serious interpersonal moral violations is then seen as appropriately directed at ideological opponents.

Gavin Haynes approaches this issue differently, saying that ideological purity policing is in fact not about morality. He thinks it's about *purity*, and this is a relative concept: people try to demonstrate that they are *more* pure than each other.⁷⁵ This creates what he calls a 'purity spiral', which is what we see in the dynamics of escalating conflict such as happened in the knitting community, and are happening in the context of other disagreements too.⁷⁶ It is 'a process of moral outbidding', using self-censorship and loyalty tests to 'weed out its detractors long before they can band together. In that sense... its momentum can be very difficult to halt'.⁷⁷ On social media, individuals stand to 'benefit enormously from taking on the status of a thought leader – from becoming a node that directed moral traffic'.⁷⁸ These incentives push in the direction of joining the purity spiral.

Even when it comes to those not motivated to seek the benefits of demonstrating purity, the incentives push people toward neutrality, rather than intervening in an attempt to stop the spiral. By intervening you make yourself a target, and risk becoming the means by which others can display their own purity, by sanctioning you. It may well be that many more people are motivated to avoid being sanctioned than they are to achieve the benefits of having demonstrated purity, but these two things together amount to purity spirals being hard to stop.

Haynes's idea is also important because it explains why *minor* disagreement is policed with such force, which can be a confusing aspect of trashing. Why, we might wonder, are feminists spending so much emotional energy on sanctioning each other over fairly insubstantial disagreements, when they have so much greater moral and ideological opposition to confront?⁷⁹ The purity spiral explanation has an answer to this, supplied by Timur Kuran in an interview with Haynes: 'People who are trying to prevent members of society from speaking the truth will often punish minor criticisms... Simply to send the message to the rest of society that no dissent will be tolerated and no attempt to form an opposing group – even one that differs only slightly from the status quo – will be tolerated. If you allow minor differences, you allow people to coordinate around minor differences, and that can encourage even greater opposition. If people get that sense, then the whole process can unravel'.⁸⁰ Haynes thinks the solution to purity spirals is to *notice* that they are about purity, not morality, and call that out early.⁸¹ On this explanation, trashing is not a unique phenomenon, it's just the name we give to overzealous moralism when it occurs in the context of feminist activism.

ix. *Performative moralism*

From its name, this explanation might sound similar to what we've just been talking about in *viii*. But it's different in its intention, and how reflective those who participate in it are likely to be able to be. Performative moralism is moral behaviour performed in order to secure particular signalling effects,

⁷³ (Collins 2009, p. 28).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁵ (Haynes 2020a). Justin Tosi & Brandon Warmke also write about this phenomenon, but they call it 'ramping up', and 'trumping up', as two of the forms that 'moral grandstanding' takes (Tosi & Warmke 2016). 'Ramping up' is to make a slightly stronger claim than the person before you (e.g. about what kind of punishment someone deserves) (*ibid.*, p. 205), 'trumping up' is to declare a moral problem where there isn't one (*ibid.*, p. 206).

⁷⁶ (Haynes 2020a; Haynes 2020b). See also discussion of purity spirals in (Redfern & Whatmore 2020).

⁷⁷ (Haynes 2020a).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ An alternative answer to this question is that the things feminists are expending energy sanctioning each other over are *not* insubstantial, even if they may appear to be at first glance. For example, for feminists who are extremely concerned about epistemic injustice against women—testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, gaslighting, etc.—it will matter a lot that we believe women, affirm women's experience, give women's testimonies uptake. Feminists who don't do this, because they think some other project is more important (like stopping the harms that women need to testify to in the first place), or have significant worries with approach (e.g. what happens when a woman's perception of her experience is distorted or exaggerated?), will be seen as compromising something at the very heart of the feminist project, and this may justify a strong reaction. Still, that need not mean trashing.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

where these effects may be desired independently of the signaller's actual beliefs or preferences. That's what sets it apart from overzealous moralism, which is generally sincerely felt. (Although, as discussed in the case of purity spirals, sometimes what looks like overzealous moralism can be done out of fear of sanctions for *not* doing it, and in that case it may be closer to performative moralism).

For example, a feminist woman working to oppose double mastectomies in girls under the age of 18 might think that it is *strategically* best to work only with left-leaning political groups on this issue, because this reduces the likelihood of other left-leaning people writing the cause off as 'conservative' or 'religious' (e.g. about the purity and sanctity of the female body, or preserving the role of motherhood with breastfeeding, rather than about reducing unnecessary surgeries and preventing future regret). In order for this strategy to succeed, however, it may not be enough that she simply work with left-leaning groups and get on with things. It may be that occasionally, when other feminist women associated with this issue work with conservative-leaning groups, she has to denounce them for doing so *in order to send the signal that she is committed to left-leaning groups only*. Denouncing what she is *against* is an easy way to send a clear signal of what she is *for*.

Whether or not it is acceptable for feminists to work with non-left groups is one of the major faultlines in feminism today, and disagreements over it have been a major cause of trashing (generally by the left-purists against the feminists who are open to alliances across the political spectrum). It is an intriguing possibility, however, that in this instance trashing is not about tribes, not about woman-hating, not about genuine moral disapproval, not about any of the other explanations, but just about being a convenient way to advance one's political goals. Left-purist feminists *couldn't* just appear fine with all their feminist colleagues allying with non-left groups, because that very appearance would undermine their commitment. If you're a left-purist then you're vehemently *not* able to take the line that different feminist women will do things differently—at least, not publicly.

There may be performative moralism on other issues, too. Whenever one's commitment to certain values can be signalled by one's disapprobation of others, and where a public signal of commitment to those initial values is likely to advance one's cause, we might expect to see that disapprobation. Another example of where this explanation might be in play is in the feminist conflict over the assertion that 'trans women are women!' This is a conflict in which there is a lot of what looks like trashing going on. But in fact, it might be that trashing those who *deny* that 'trans women are women!' is a way to signal support for transwomen as a group, and *that* is the real goal that is being advanced by the trashing.⁸² This explanation is like tribalism (discussed in *i.*) in the sense that there need not be any real emotion underwriting the trashing, and in fact it need not have much to do with the women being trashed at all. They are mere vehicles for a larger public communication.

x. Resentment (justified)

In *ii.* we discussed the fact that trashing is often directed at feminist leaders. Focusing on this point allows us to explore another explanation, that is more focused on the emotion of *envy* or *resentment* between women. Writing about the way mothers sabotage each other when it comes to breastfeeding, Allison Dixley writes of envy 'admitting that one is envious is akin to declaring one's inferiority. This dark, intense, implacable and irrational emotion is painfully private and publicly feared... It is characterised by tension and torment. The begrudging nature of envy stems from a preoccupation with one's own limitations and defects'.⁸³ Could the same dynamic be behind at least some of the trashing in the feminist movement?⁸⁴

There are some good reasons to think it could. They relate to the fact that while most women have a chance to participate in feminist activism in some form, there is an unequal chance for *recognition*. Feminist women with a social status that affords them public credibility may be given greater

⁸² I have outlined this possibility elsewhere, see (Lawford-Smith 2019).

⁸³ (Dixley 2014, p. 163).

⁸⁴ There's an important disanalogy between the breastfeeding example and the feminist activism example. In the breastfeeding case, there are background ideas about what it means to be a *good woman*, informing the standards to which women aspire as mothers, the fulfillment (or otherwise) of which creates envy and resentment between women. But in the feminist activism case, it's not clear that the emergent leaders are *good women*. Indeed insofar as they violate many norms of femininity they may be *bad women*. One way to resolve this tension is to say that the standards are relative to particular communities of women, so that within feminism what makes a *good woman* is recognition for contributions. Another way to resolve it is to say that feminism itself has been co-opted into an idea of being a *good woman* in the sense not relativized to particular communities, for example because the 'new good woman' is independent and sassy (in a sexy way, of course).

opportunities to speak for the movement (e.g. lawyers, doctors, academics, journalists), and subsequently receive greater recognition from other women for their contributions *to* the movement. It is perfectly reasonable for women who don't have this same access, but are making substantial contributions to feminist activism in other ways, to feel frustrated about the asymmetry in recognition. This dynamic is likely to be exacerbated in countries with stronger class hierarchies, because the women who have the social status that gives them the greater opportunity to speak for the movement may have (or be perceived to have) that status as a result of a more ingrained inequality of opportunity. (The United Kingdom and India are good examples of this, although very different in terms of the progress of feminist movement).

Similarly, feminist women who don't have this kind of access *depend on* women who are so-placed to speak their concerns, to the media, to the public, to policy-makers. This means there is a lot at stake if and when those higher-profile feminists make mistakes, or do things that other feminist women would not do, or think it inadvisable to do. Frustration and disappointment at not being represented in the right way may end up being expressed in trashing.

I have focused on *justified resentment* rather than resentment more generally. That is not because I don't think resentment more generally could be playing an explanatory role in trashing; likely it could. Rather it's because I think justified resentment is the more interesting and complex phenomena, one that the feminist movement could do more to accommodate. There are interesting questions to be asked about the exact nature of the responsibilities naturally emerging feminist leaders have to the women in the movements they're affiliated with, even when those movements are highly unorganized. Women in this position often seem to feel that they have *no* responsibility, that they speak only for themselves. But although they may *intend* to speak only for themselves, they will often be publicly understood to be speaking for the movement. That means their individual, unilateral actions can damage the movement, and that is something that all movement women have an interest in. Without more formal ways to influence spokeswomen, social sanctioning may be the only tool available, and if that happens through social media, with the associated dynamics of moral grandstanding,⁸⁵ it is likely to mean trashing.⁸⁶

xi. Feminine socialisation & expected social roles

An alternative explanation than offered in *ii.* (anti-hierarchy) of why it is so often women taking leadership positions who are trashed, comes from thinking about the traits women leaders have as being norm-violating relative to ideals of femininity. Freeman notes that the overachiever is the assertive woman, and that assertiveness is a failure to perform femininity correctly. She speculates that women may be policing this norm-violation without conscious awareness that this is what's actually happening.⁸⁷ In support of this explanation in terms of women's expected social role is Freeman's observation that 'two different types of women are trashed', where one is the leader/achiever, but the other is the 'mother'.

What she means by 'mother' is not literal mothers, but the supportive and self-effacing woman, the woman who is 'constantly attending to others' personal problems', who 'play[s] the mother role very well'.⁸⁸ She says the women who 'look the part' for this role are expected to play it and then trashed when they refuse; women who play the role but cannot meet other women's impossible high expectations for them are trashed when they fail to meet those expectations. Trashing is a tool used to pressure women to 'conform to a narrow standard', and while this standard is 'clothed in the rhetoric

⁸⁵ See fn. 74. In addition to ramping up and trumping up there's also piling on (also known as dogpiling), excessive emotional displays, and claims that something's moral wrongness is self-evident. See (Tosi & Warmke 2016). Piling on, where many people join a chorus saying the same thing, can often *feel like* trashing simply because of the volume of criticism, even when what is being said / disagreed with itself has only moderate strength.

⁸⁶ It is also worth noting the role of social media platforms in exacerbating this dynamic. Several women who are generally taken to be 'spokeswomen' for gender critical feminism, for example, have had their social media accounts banned as part of an ideologically-driven move to suppress gender critical feminist speech. This has the effect of cutting those women off from their informal constituencies, and making them less available for informal consultation and constructive criticism. I'm thinking in particular of Meghan Murphy of *Feminist Current*, who is banned from Twitter; and Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull of *Standing for Women*, who at the time of writing was on her 3rd 30-day ban from Facebook, banned from advertising on Instagram, and banned permanently from change.org, teespring.com, Mumsnet, and Twitter.

⁸⁷ (Freeman 1976).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

of revolution and feminism’, ‘underneath [it] are some very traditional ideas about women’s proper roles’.⁸⁹

Audre Lorde also leans toward this type of explanation when she talks about members of the black community policing a specific version of blackness:

“We were poised for attack, not always in the most effective places. When we disagreed with one another about the solution to a particular problem, we were often far more vicious to each other than to the originators of our common problem. Historically, difference had been used so cruelly against us that as a people we were reluctant to tolerate any diversion from what was externally defined as Blackness. In the 60s, political correctness became not a guideline for living, but a new set of shackles. A small and vocal part of the Black community lost sight of the fact that unity does not mean unanimity – Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity. In order to work together we do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk”.⁹⁰

This is an imposition of expected social role applied to blackness itself. Applied to women, it would suggest we should anticipate attacks between feminist women about ‘what is externally defined as womanhood’. But as Lorde points out for blackness, we can be *unified* as women in the broad goal of achieving women’s equality or women’s liberation, without needing to have accomplished *unanimity* between all feminist women about feminist issues, including what womanhood consists in, what explains women’s oppression, and what the right vision for a feminist future is. We do not need to make ourselves ‘the same’ in order to be understood by men, or in order to work together. *Women* are not ‘some standardly digestible quantity’, they are half the population of the world, and so can be expected to be incredibly diverse.

What is tragic about this explanation of trashing is that if it were motivating feminist women at the conscious level, they would surely repudiate it. Liberation from narrow ideas of femininity is a central concern of feminist movement; it would surely be deeply uncomfortable to confront the fact that we were imposing these roles on each other in the course of seeking that liberation.

xii. The ideal of sisterhood

Freeman’s own explanation of trashing was that it emerged from the ideal of sisterhood, which was impossible to live up to. bell hooks writes in *Feminist Theory* of ‘white’ or ‘bourgeois’ women liberationists’ vision of sisterhood that:

‘...their version of Sisterhood was informed by racist and classist assumptions about white womanhood, that the white “lady” (that is to say bourgeois woman) should be protected from all that might upset or discomfort her and shielded from negative realities that might lead to confrontation. Their version of Sisterhood dictated that sisters were to “unconditionally” love one another; that they were to avoid conflict and minimize disagreement; that they were not to criticize one another, especially in public. For a time these mandates created an illusion of unity, suppressing the competition, hostility, perpetual disagreement, and abusive criticism (trashing) that was often the norm in feminist groups’.⁹¹

In hooks’ view, trashing was actually *suppressed*, at least for a time, by the ideal of sisterhood. But as the view of womanhood the suppression of all conflict was based on became increasingly untenable, so too did the suppression, and trashing (and transparency about the lack of unity) re-emerged.

Barbara Ryan also points to the ideal of sisterhood, but not as an impossible ideal failures to live up to which *caused* trashing, but as something that simply made trashing harder to bear:

‘Because feminism is a movement that exhibits an important departure from other social movements, that is, it is led by women, there is an expectation that it should not be hierarchical, elitist, or controlling of adherents. Indeed, feminism is meant to value, support, and unite women. It was the expectation of “a haven from the ravages of a sexist society; a place where one would be understood” that led to despair when, for some participants, just the opposite occurred... In repeated incidents of what became known as trashing, the sense of joy in women discovering themselves was dissipated’.⁹²

If Ryan is right, then we still need an explanation of *why* trashing occurs, and undermines the hopes that women have for feminism. We’ll have to draw on one of the other explanations to fill this in.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ (Lorde 1984, p. 136).

⁹¹ (hooks 2000, pp. 45-47).

⁹² (Ryan 2013, p. 62).

3. Final thoughts

‘Sisterhood’ being an impossible ideal does not exhaust the plausible explanations of trashing within feminist activism; there are at least eleven other alternatives that may explain it, or overdetermine its existence. To me, the most intriguing explanations are those that take the sting out of trashing, either by focusing on its communicative / signalling effects, or by focusing on how it is one of the only tools available for the expression of dissatisfaction under anarchic conditions (the relationship between the ‘represented’ constituency and the ‘representative’ woman). But I have my own reasons for minimizing the extent of the genuine negative emotions behind trashing, given that I am routinely trashed myself.

We have not fully resolved the question of whether trashing is a unique phenomenon. Freeman denied that trashing was unique to feminism, seeing it as one form of the more general ‘use of social pressures to induce conformity and intolerance for individuality’, which she saw as ‘endemic’ across society. Ryan shared this view, writing about how ‘most movements experience factionalism, many collapsing under the weight of excessive infighting’. She gives the civil rights movement, gay liberation movement, and leftist organizing as examples.⁹³ Lorde described dynamics within the black liberation movement that were parallel to trashing in the feminist movement.

Certainly the contemporary phenomena of ‘cancelling’, ‘mobbing’, and ‘deplatforming’ are conceptually close to trashing, and the dynamics of ‘woke culture’, ‘cancel culture’, ‘grandstanding’, ‘virtue signalling’, and ‘purity spirals’—all more general social dynamics—impact or feed into feminist trashing.⁹⁴ But I think it is useful to reserve a term for the feminism-specific phenomenon that Freeman first lifted the lid on, precisely *because* it has some plausible explanations that are specific to women as a group (e.g. internalised misogyny, internalised norms of femininity). I have not resolved whether trashing is about women in general or about feminist women in particular. Some explanations point to the former, and some to the latter. It would be illuminating to compare trashing within feminism with the dynamics between members of other social justice movements, and between people in other oppressed social groups. But that comparison will have to be a project for another time.

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⁹³ (Ryan 2013, p. 61).

⁹⁴ Some of these examples come from (Haynes 2020a).

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