

**Reframed Femininity & The Internal Gaze:
A Description & Analysis of *close your legs, dear* Exhibition¹**

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¹ This writing sample is based on my thesis, which was submitted in August 2016 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

close your legs, dear is a multimedia installation (see Fig. 1) comprising of five moving images (titled *Piece I* through *V*) which are projected and looped on various surfaces (including walls and fabricated objects). Additionally, this body of work consists of both a sculpture involving mirror fragments (titled *Mirror Piece*) and a full-scale photograph printed on Photo Tex paper² and installed in a corner of a wall. In what follows I will provide an overview of the themes that *close your legs, dear* engages with. Next, the subject of femininity is discussed as it pertains to this body of work as well as the significance of the title itself. I will continue by explaining the concept of (what I call) the *internal gaze* and its relation to Jacques Lacan's *mirror stage* concept. This is followed by a detailed description of each piece in *close your legs, dear*—emphasizing how the feminine image is reframed—and an explanation of how this work situates itself in the ongoing discussion of femininity within the visual arts and feminist artwork. The paper ends with a short conclusion.



Fig. 1: *close your legs, dear* installation view (2016), William Harris Gallery, Rochester, NY.

² Photo Tex is an adhesive printing paper made of polyester fabric.

close your legs, dear examines the notion of an internal gaze, or self-regulation, through the subjective experience of the pursuit of a feminine ideal and the underlying emotional disquietude that accompanies that pursuit. This body of work primarily utilizes self-portraiture through time-based moving images to examine the figurative fragmentation of the body in the subject. The fragmentation of the body is also a metaphorical fragmentation of the ego, which becomes a host to obsessive self-observation and self-regulation vis-à-vis the feminine ideal.

Femininity describes a range of behaviors and characteristics attributed to women.³ While the specifics of femininity vary culturally and geographically, feminine behaviors are nevertheless consistently considered less esteemed than masculine behaviors within patriarchal societies.⁴ Yet women are “rewarded” when exhibiting socially accepted and expected “feminine” attributes.⁵ A paradox emerges as a strong woman is expected to engage in specific behaviors that manifest traits deemed feminine, but in acting feminine she is considered weak—by both men *and* women—by the very nature of her actions. For example, according to art critic, Lucy Lippard, the artist Hanna Wilke could not be a feminist while exhibiting feminine behaviors as established under a patriarchal society.⁶ Wilke responded with her famous piece *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, but the point is that Lippard and other feminist art critics could not voice such criticism without adopting a pre-established stance that certain characteristics are *inherently* weak. Although unintentional, this sort of stance ultimately propagates the same oppressive patriarchal social system it initially fights against, encouraging a narrow understanding of feminism as both a social and artistic movement, as Wilke herself made a point to address.

It is this paradox of the feminine position that the title *close your legs, dear* directly addresses. While perhaps foreign to most, if not all, men, “close your legs, dear” is both a protective and oppressive statement said to many young women cross-culturally by their parents

³ Shea, Munyi, *et al.* "Toward A Constructionist Perspective Of Examining Femininity Experience: The Development And Psychometric Properties Of The Subjective Femininity Stress Scale." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38.2 (2014): 275-291.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁶ Fitzpatrick, Tracy. “Hannah Wilke: Gestures.” (Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 2009) 51.

or guardians. The title is not capitalized in order to further reference it being extracted from a collective female experience. The statement made from an innocently protective stance perpetuates the notion that a female's sex and her body is something vulnerable that needs to be protected. It establishes an early basis in which women must be wary and anxious of being female, and even feminine. "Close your legs, dear" is said from a loving and protective place. Though often well intended, it is these kinds of subtle oppressions that this body of work is engaged with.

A recent study by Munyi Shea and Y. Joel Wong⁷ describes a link between "femininity-related constructs" and a range of "psychological problems among women and adolescent girls."⁸ This suggests that women who pursue feminine traits and the feminine ideal, with respect to their cultural and geographical backgrounds, may suffer from various mental health disorders.⁹ Furthermore, their studies show that patriarchal societies create emotional distress in both men and women; men exhibiting behaviors characterized as feminine are similarly considered weak by such societies. However, as Shea and Wong elaborate, emotional distress may also occur when women *disregard* gender-appropriate behavior.¹⁰ While Shea, Wong, and other researchers are currently looking for scientific tools that would allow for a better understanding of subjective femininity experiences, these experiences have been consistently addressed in artwork, most prominently since the 1970s.

In my own subjective experience, the pursuit of a feminine ideal has manifested itself as an ever increasing emotional disconnect from my physical body. This struggle between desiring the *ideal* feminine image and necessarily failing to attain the ideal, coincides with the subjective feeling of an imperfect and fragmented body. It is through attempts to unite these irreconcilable concepts that constant emotional distress ensues. In order to both cope with and mitigate this distress, my personal solution has been an extreme form of self-regulation and obsessive self-

⁷ Shea, Munyi; Wong, Y. Joel. "Femininity And Women's Psychological Well-Being" In P. Lundberg-Love, K. L. Nadal, & M. A. Paludi (Eds.), *Women and Mental Disorders* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger) 17-36.

⁸ Shea, Munyi, *et al.* "Toward A Constructionist Perspective Of Examining Femininity Experience: The Development And Psychometric Properties Of The Subjective Femininity Stress Scale." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38.2 (2014): 276.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

observation, yielding a corresponding mental presence: the internal gaze. In 2012, Whitney Chadwick noted the critic John Berger's 1972 statement, that "'a woman must continually watch herself,' in which he elaborated on Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 observation that femininity is formed in part from the reflected or mirror images against which women are taught to measure themselves."¹¹ The two dimensions of observation—to watch and to comply—tie into several aspects of *close your legs, dear*, particularly in issues concerning the self-regulatory gaze accompanying the pursuit and maintenance of feminine characteristics. The female in this body of work is complicit in both complying with feminine standards and watching her femininity. The notion of the fragmented body and an internal gaze arises in Jacques Lacan's *mirror stage* concept. According to Lacan, the ideal-I, or ideal ego, is the image of wholeness and perfection that the ego strives for but ultimately cannot achieve.¹² This ideal image is established in the *mirror stage*, and is the point at which an infant is still learning how to master motoric skills and bodily functions resulting in the feeling of an imperfect physical state. A primary dissonance is thus created between the perfect image reflection and the feeling of a fragmented body. The *mirror stage* concept has resonated with me as a way to metaphorically open up a space for exploring my subjective feminine experience. The divide created between the ideal-I and the Ego yields a self-regulatory internal gaze. This is the broader definition of the gaze utilized in *close your legs, dear*.

Interior Piece (see Fig. 2) uses the absence of a physical body as a metaphor for the idea of an internal gaze. The piece conjunctly references an internal mental space, as well as the literal space in which the examination or interrogation of a feminine ideal is taking place—implied through the exposed light bulb reminiscent of an interrogation scene. Tension is held between the internal gaze and the absent body—indicated through the chair, which appears to be uncomfortable and even uninviting. This further implies the manner in which the subject is compelled to self-regulate even when this results in serious emotional disquietude and physical discomfort. The image exhibits a staged-quality to the composition, essentially mimicking a reality where there isn't one. Additionally, the method in which the piece is installed, printed full-scale and situated in a corner to align with the one present in the image itself, questions what

¹¹ Chadwick, Whitney. "Women, Art, and Society" (Thames & Hudson Ltd. London 2012) 361.

¹² Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) 502-509.

is tangible vs. intangible; the real vs. the imagined; external space vs. an internal one; all the while providing a “stage” on which the feminine ideal and femininity can be questioned, addressed, and discussed.



Fig. 2: *Interior Piece* (2016); photographic installation.

Unlike *Interior Piece*, the videos in *close your legs, dear* (e.g., Fig. 3-7) function as fragmented moments of observation of a feminine image, while featuring movements that hint at disquietude. Solitary instances of rumination are restaged and stripped-down through careful framing that focuses on the cropped body parts of a female subject, referencing the metaphorical fragmentation of the body. Although the gestures and compositions are derived from a reality, they are restaged in order to allow for a reframing of the feminine image.

Piece II (see Fig. 3), shows the subject sitting in a cream-colored button-down shirt that exposes part of her neckline and thighs. Her body faces the camera, though her face and everything below her knees is cropped out of the frame; her hands and sitting position constantly shift indicating unrest. The subject exhibits characteristics that are associated with many traditional visual representations of femininity: her nails are manicured and polished, her hair is long (an attribute considered by many societies as sensual and feminine), and her shirt is white (a

color traditionally indicating purity while simultaneously erotically teasing since white silk is sheer). Utilizing a subject that exhibits traditional femininity, while conjunctly exhibiting repetitive motions that hint at unease, allows for a reframing of the traditional feminine image.



Fig. 3: (Left) Compilation of video stills from *Piece II*. (Right) *Piece II* installation view (2016); looped moving-image projection (duration 9:35).

Piece II is projected on a fabricated three-dimensional object, which is painted white and constructed in a manner similar to a pedestal, creating a seemingly uninterrupted extension of the gallery wall and space. The piece is installed in this manner in order to acknowledge and reference the depiction of female as object in the history of visual arts. *Piece II* and *Piece IV* (see Fig. 5) are projected in the angles in which they were shot at, to further situate the viewer in a position that mimics the perspective of the camera and its viewing angle. The audience thus becomes both viewer and witness to this exploration and investigation into the consequences of pursuing ideal femininity (as constructed by society).

In *Piece III* (see Fig. 4), the subject is seen wearing the same clothing as was worn in *Piece II*. This time she's sitting in profile with her head and hands cropped out, while her raised bare legs rock back and forth. Both *Piece III* and *Piece V* (see Fig. 7) are projected on solitary walls in order to allow for an expanded viewing space as well as a solitary viewing experience. *Piece III* is projected at the height of where the chair she's sitting on might be. Each moving

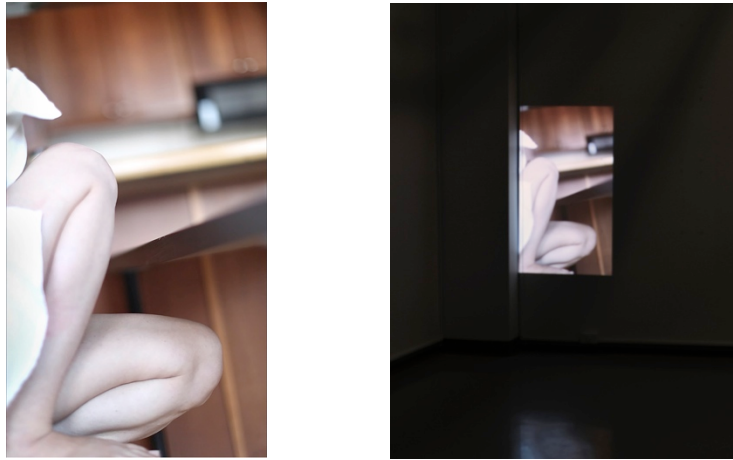


Fig. 4: (Left) Video still from *Piece III*. (Right) *Piece III* installation view (2016); looped moving-image projection (duration 1:00).

image exhibits varying degrees of subtle motions that are primarily gestures the female subject performs in repetition. These are further looped to reinforce the idea of incessant unease and rumination. These repetitive motions, much as any movement or bodily gestures, in and of themselves, do not possess inherent or fixed meaning. Instead, their semantic content is constituted by preconceived social and contextual notions of both the perceiver and perceived. For this reason, the gestures can be construed in a multitude of ways; extrapolated interpretations are subjected to a viewer's preconceived notions on feminine beauty and femininity, either consciously or subconsciously. Moving images provide the platform needed to illustrate the cyclical nature of obsessive behavior and thought processes across time. In addition, they are able to capture the subtlest of movements in a way that cannot be similarly conveyed through still images. With each iteration, a further heightened level of sensuality and disquietude becomes more apparent.

In *Piece IV* (see Fig. 5), the subject's bare legs are depicted lying in a bath of milky water; the water subtly pulsates against her smooth legs as a thin stream of water continuously runs out from the faucet. Her legs are so white they verge on seeming bloodless. This references the historical use of both a lighter skin tone and seemingly lifeless figure to indicate femininity within visual representations of the female body. The piece is projected on the floor, thereby referencing and activating the exhibition space itself. Because each piece yields no catharsis,

only a repetition of a fragmented state, these moments, thwarting desire, fail to offer a climax or resolution. For this reason, the moving images deny expected visual gratification, or a cathartic release, mirroring the lack of physical and mental reprieve within the subject herself. *close your legs, dear* has elements of both intrigue and dissatisfaction. This is experienced through viewing the compositions, which portray femininity and reframe it by simultaneously portraying motions that indicate emotional and physical unease with regards to the female body. Since none of the videos exhibit a traditional narrative—beginning, climax, and resolution—the audience is left with a certain level of frustration.

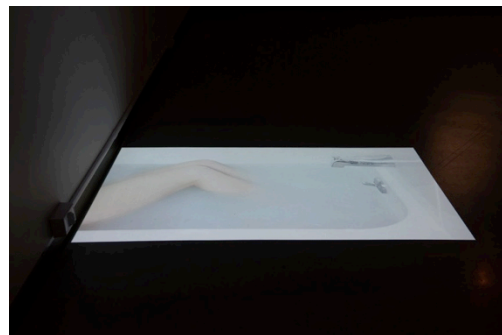


Fig. 5: (Left) Video still from *Piece IV*. (Right) *Piece IV* installation view (2016); looped moving-image projection (duration 10:00).

Looking ahead to the next piece, it is worthwhile to reflect on the relation between features that arise in all the moving-images to Laura Mulvey's work. In her much debated essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,¹³ Mulvey discusses the notion of a *male gaze* and how Hollywood films have predominantly pandered to it. According to Mulvey, to satisfy the male gaze means that a female character in a film will never be the creator of meaning, but rather the bearer of it: She will not further a plot nor a narrative, she will instead interrupt it. The cinematic female character thus creates a pause in the narrative.¹⁴ This results in the objectification of the female figure subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of the male protagonist.¹⁵ Within this context the image of the feminine figure results in a passive and weak woman. Mulvey's *male gaze* is used in abundance when analyzing artwork that utilizes a feminine image across a multitude of media formats. The moving images in *close your legs, dear* extract this pause—the female figure—

¹³ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen* 16.3 1975) 6-18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

from its traditional context. Each video piece isolates the figure and extends this “paused” moment even further: through the looping of each gesture, the narrative pause, which could easily be overlooked in traditional cinema, is reinforced and amplified.

Piece I (see Fig. 6), depicts the subject’s shadow, sitting while her feet touch the ground, brushing her hair. The activity of a woman brushing her hair was chosen specifically because of its abundant use in the visual arts and art history (most significantly in the *Impressionist* era), where it is a prominent method of conveying femininity. While *close your legs, dear* utilizes this traditional method of depiction, it takes a subtle yet critical viewpoint regarding this representational form. This is in contrast, for instance, with the less subtle work by Marina Abramovic titled *Art Must Be Beautiful; Artist Must Be Beautiful*. While Abramovic’s female subject criticizes such traditional depictions of femininity in an aggressive and even painful manner, *Piece I* does so by exposing both the futility of such an act (through the cyclical motion created by looping the video pieces) and the accompanying anxiety prominent in the female subject who pursues unattainable standards of femininity.

Piece I is the only piece in *close your legs, dear* that portrays almost the whole figure of the female subject. Based on the outline of the shadow, one can infer that the subject is in a state of undress. This increases the feeling that the audience member is an intruding viewer, and/or a feeling of voyeurism, which in turn engenders unease in the viewer thereby mimicking one of the main themes of *close your legs, dear*: the female subject feels uncomfortable in her own skin. In addition, by isolating and repeating the gestures made by the female figure, the narrative pause and its source – the feminine figure – is reframed.

Piece I is projected onto a constructed panel. The panel mimics the wall upon which the shadow in the moving image is formed. The point in the lower right corner (where the wall and floor meet) in the moving image is situated at the bottom corner of the panel. This is done in order to reinforce the content and compositional choices in the moving image. Additionally, by mimicking the originally captured shadow and its space, *Piece I* confuses a viewer making them wonder for one moment whether there might be a female in the space performing; yet, upon rounding the corner of this panel, it is clear that nothing is there.

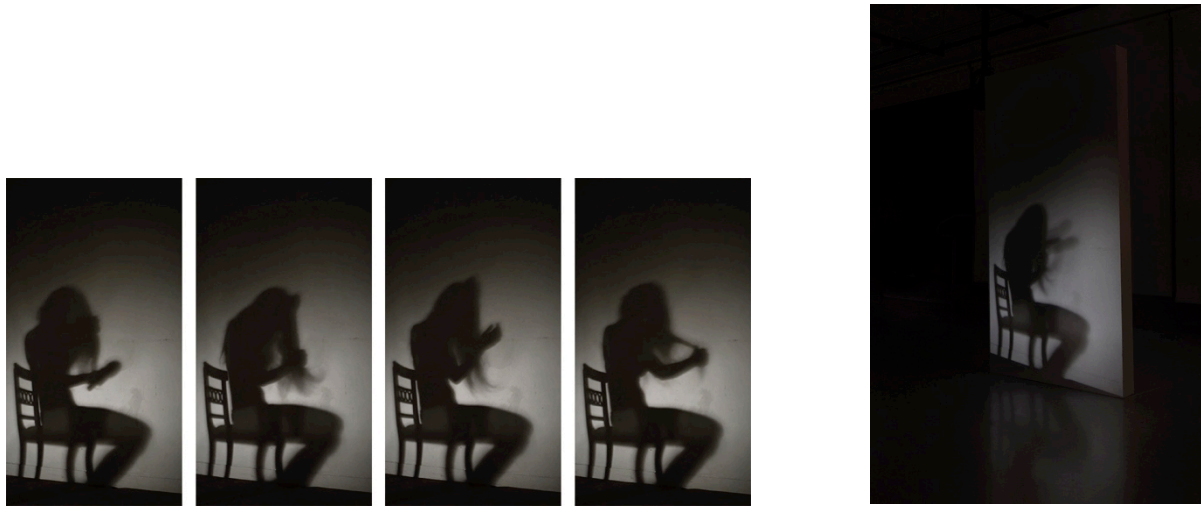


Fig. 6: (Left) Compilation of video stills from *Piece I*. (Right) *Piece I* installation view (2016); looped moving-image projection (duration 8:22).

The female subject in *close your legs, dear* is both emotionally and physically exposed. *Piece V* (see Fig. 7), portrays a close-up of the subject's face, head resting on a pillow. Her hair and raised arms veil everything but her lips, which are slightly open while she breathes in and out; subtle movement in the arms can be seen with each breath she takes. The piece is projected on a solitary wall at a height suggestive of a bed.



Fig. 7: (Left) Video still from *Piece V*. (Right) *Piece V* installation view (2016); looped moving-image projection (duration 1:02)

gesture within the context of a personal space creates an intimate and voyeuristic viewing experience. Additionally, because of the evidence that feminine attributes are ranked as socially subordinate to corresponding male ones¹⁶, the subject could be considered weak and analogous to the female characters analyzed by Mulvey in cinema. The intent of *close your legs, dear* is to additionally challenge such rankings made with gender associated criteria. Thus, although the female figure in the moving images is feminine and vulnerable, she is not necessarily weak or passive. Her weakness or passivity is created in the eye of the perceiving subject. That it is in the eye of the perceiver is reinforced by the fact that the artist positions herself in the role of the female subject. She has complete control over what is being viewed and therefore is neither weak nor passive. In this manner *close your legs, dear* exposes the fallacy in considering vulnerability and femininity by extension as weaknesses.

The internal gaze discussed in *close your legs, dear* illuminates the subject's own complicity in guiding and regulating acceptable femininity. Through this understanding, the female subject is freed to both accept the difficulty of the desire to attain the Ideal feminine, and the futility of it - allowing for a space of contemplation and expansion. While the moving images reference the internal gaze, it is through *Interior Piece* (see Fig. 2), *Mirror Piece* (see Fig. 8) and the installation of the moving images that the external gaze is insinuated. The work depends on a back and forth relationship of observation and vacillation of the gaze. *Mirror Piece* reinforces this relationship along with the duality of the act of observation. It is situated in the middle of the exhibition space, independent of any walls. This piece is constructed in a way that doesn't allow for more than a fragment of an audience's body to be reflected back (see Fig. 9), mimicking the cropped framing of the female subject portrayed in *close your legs, dear*. *Mirror Piece* further addresses and expands on the subject of the gaze by drawing attention to the act of observing the body; a viewer's gaze can vacillate between (i) observing a fragment of their own body, (ii) to that of another audience member, and (iii) to the fragmented body of the female subject herself. This piece directly references philosopher Slavoj Žižek's notion of the *object* gazing back¹⁷, which is further reinforced by the installation of the moving images themselves.

¹⁶ Shea, Munyi, et al. "Toward A Constructionist Perspective Of Examining Femininity Experience: The Development And Psychometric Properties Of The Subjective Femininity Stress Scale." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38.2 (2014): 275.

¹⁷ Murphy, Paula. "Psychoanalysis and Film Theory Part 2: Reflections and Refutations" (Vo. 2 2005) 1-16.

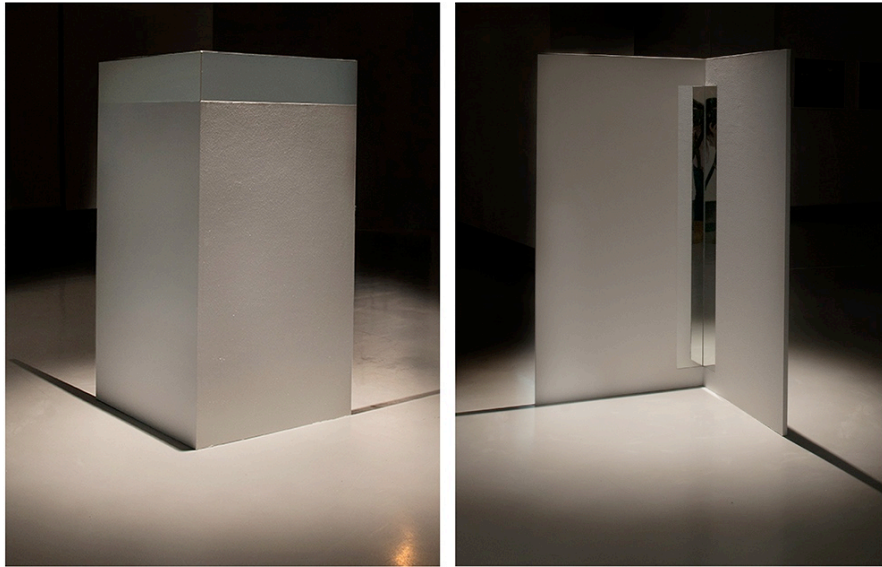


Fig. 8: Diptych *Mirror Piece* installation view (2016); mixed-media sculpture. *Left* view of side A. *Right* view of side B.



Fig. 9: Diptych *Mirror Piece* detail (2016); mixed-media sculpture. *Left* view of side A. *Right* view of side B.

When looking at the installation of *close you legs, dear*, each work can be viewed on its own when experienced up-close. Alternatively, each piece can be seen in conjunction with the others simultaneously in a peripheral sight line (see Fig. 1). Since the work speaks about subtle disquietude, the physical space between each piece allows for room to breathe and contemplate the peripheral anxiety present when viewing all of the videos at once in the gallery. As these are

projections, a viewer's shadow will participate in the observing experience further questioning the subject of the gaze and the notion of the authentic.

In conclusion, *close your legs, dear* addresses the paradoxically protective and oppressive self-regulatory gaze, the feminine ideal, obsessive self-observation, and all of its accompanying emotional disquietude. The goal of my work is to continue to challenge established notions of femininity through the reframing of the feminine image, and through an exposure of the internal gaze itself and the act of observation. The work creates a space for continued investigation of these themes and situates itself in the ongoing visual and theoretical conversations related to the feminine ideal, femininity and feminisms.

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