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*Men Against Pornography*

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## MALE SEXUALITY: WHY OWNERSHIP IS SEXY†‡

John Stoltenberg\*

This year, 1992, has been getting a lot of dubious attention because five hundred years ago three wayward ships of European registry rudely arrived on this continent. Myself, I would have preferred to commemorate a more liberatory event, and I have one in mind—something that happened exactly two hundred years ago, in 1792. That was the year a book was first published—Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>1</sup>—without which this conference would have been unthinkable.

I suspect that if Mary Wollstonecraft were alive and here in this room today, she would find that many of the words she wrote two hundred years ago are still disconcertingly current. After all, Wollstonecraft was an explorer in quest of sexual equality. And two hundred years later, not one of us is there yet.

For instance, here is a sentence Wollstonecraft wrote about men—men then: "Men, in general," she said, "seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out."<sup>2</sup>

Now it seems—so far as anyone can tell—that men's justification of prejudice is still the prevailing wind of social discourse, whether in forums of public policy or interpersonal relations. And if you look

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‡ This paper is essentially the speech that Mr. Stoltenberg presented at the *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* Symposium entitled *Prostitution: From Academia to Activism*, held on October 31, 1992, at the University of Michigan Law School. Most of its speechlike characteristics have been preserved so as to maintain its authenticity. In addition, the punctuation and style are the author's.

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1. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN: AN AUTHORITY TEXT, BACKGROUNDS, CRITICISM* (Carol H. Poston ed., 2d ed., 1975).

2. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *supra* note 1, at 12.

accurately at academia, you find men's justification of prejudice operating not only as *zeitgeist* but as *canon*. So, in honor of Wollstonecraft's legacy, I would like to try to root out one of the prejudices that persists in male supremacy and male sexuality—a certain imbibed prejudice without which prostitution would be unthinkable.

What I want to address is what I call the eroticism of owning.

We have a lot of circumstantial evidence that this eroticism exists. For instance, based on the testimony of women who are or have been sexually owned in marriage, taken in rape, and/or sexually used for a fee in prostitution, it appears that for many men, possession is a principal part of their sexual behavior. Many men can scarcely discern any erotic feelings that are not associated with *owning* someone else's body.

In English—as in many other languages—the verb *to possess* means both “to own” and “to fuck,” and that semantic coincidence appears to be no accident. Apparently, many men equate standard “male” sexual behavior with literal ownership of another human being's body. To have sex with someone and simultaneously to be “a real man” is to *have* that person, to *take* that person, to *possess* that person. To have sex and to have *a* sex—if you were born penised—requires a property relation of some sort. From the diverse experiences of humans who are or have been sexually owned—connecting the disparate dots, if you will, of their billion points of fright—we can infer what looks like a unified big picture: the eroticism of owning.

But from sexual owners we seem to hear only rehashings of the prejudices that justify their proprietary sexual behavior: “It's man's nature . . . it's woman's nature . . . it's god's will . . . it's her fault . . . it's manifest heterosexual destiny . . . she wants it . . . I need it . . . he loves it . . . she deserves it . . . whatever turns me on . . . she's getting paid for it . . .” If we take sexual owners—abusive husbands, rapists, johns—at their word, we might infer a pattern of gender-linked, self-referential delusion, but we would not necessarily glean anything noteworthy about the fundamental connection between property and sexuality and gender. To do that we must expose the erotics of economics.

Gender is a social fiction, though it resonates within our human bodies and brains emotionally and physically. But the social fiction of gender also resonates in between human bodies *economically*. To feel real, to be made flesh, the social fiction of gender has attached to the property relation.

The economic relation of owner and owned can be found throughout human history: in slavery and the slave trade, in the family and

fathers' ownership of human breeding stock. What is not often noted is the way the economic relation of owner and owned has become the substance and substructure of all sexual relations that construct social gender. For the social fiction of gender to make emotional and physical sense in human bodies and brains—for certain human beings to feel they really belong to the sex class "men"—an eroticism must be learned, an eroticism of owning; and this eroticism must be experienced with the same urgency as social gender itself. For one human being to "own" another live human being does not otherwise shore up gender identity. But owning a live human being through *sex* makes gender make *sense*; it lends owning an emotional and physical resonance; it lodges social gender in bodies and brains. The social fiction of gender feels real only within the erotics of economics—when "owning" becomes the same sexual turn-on as "being the man there."

Now, to "be the man there" is a meaningless proposition unless one is committing effective acts of disparagement and domination; unless one is managing one's gender anxiety by selecting relational acts that will incontrovertibly establish one's worth and identity somewhere over and above someone else who is *not* the man there. One cannot rest on the laurels of one's physiology; one must constantly do derogating deeds in order to be the man there. The social fiction of gender is always a matter of dominance, not difference (to use Professor MacKinnon's phrase)<sup>3</sup>—of acts, not anatomy.

Conveniently, the economic relation of owner to owned helps owners avoid having to make so many such nuisance decisions about how to maintain their dominance. The economic relation of sexual owner to someone else's sexually owned body is a great expedient. You don't have to decide every little detail of every relational act to assert and believe you're the man there. Instead, with your ownership of another human being's body established in the proprietary way you have sex, you can know you are the man *there*, at least in clear-cut contrast to the body you sexually own.

But owning that body in and through sex has to make you feel closer to manhood; owning has to make you believe in your physical and emotional reality as a man; owning has to convince you erotically that you have an authentic sexual identity. Otherwise owning someone *else's* body would make no emotional or physical sense. Otherwise owning would not be erotic. Otherwise economics would not be sexual.

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3. CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, *FEMINISM UNMODIFIED* 32–45 (1987).

The erotics of economics have emerged in male-supremacist history in the private-property sense of the verb “to own.” And they arise also in the biography of nearly every penised human—through his personal erotic adaptation to life in male supremacy—in the proprietary sense of the verb “to fuck.” In no other way could the economic relation between owner and owned come to feel so sexy to so many human beings. In no other way could some select human beings find their way to a socially convincing sexual identity with such apparent passion, flushed with such a prideful sense of power.

From the point of view of someone born penised into male supremacy, this means learning a physical imperative to have sex in a specifically proprietary way, in order to feel one has a social gender at all. To personally perpetuate the erotics of economics, to do his part, he must learn to feel he has to *have* someone, he has to *take* someone, he has to *possess* someone—otherwise he is not legitimately a man and therefore he is less than nobody. He may go so far as to feel the other person’s body is literally *his*—to do with whatever he wants. Like an ownable object. Like an ownable thing. Like his private, personal property. He may feel that if he *wants* to have it, then obviously he should just be able to buy it or take it. He may feel packed solid with the emotional and physical feelings of *owning*. He may feel utterly terrified to experience any other, nonproprietary kinds of emotional and physical communications and sensations, or to act sexually in any ways that do not stake his claim to someone else’s flesh—for fear that if he does so he will feel *owned*, and therefore not a real man.

For countless humans raised to be a man, that is what *having* sex means: *Having* it. *Having* someone. Having someone—owning them—as an *it*. Then having *more* of it—having more *its*—to feel more real, to feel more real a man. Having sex to have a gender.

Marriage, rape, and prostitution may go by very different appellations, and the women experiencing each of them may be known by different names as well (wife, rape victim, whore), and the practices may fall into three different categories legally. But seen from the point of view of an acculturated male-supremacist sexuality—witnessed through sexual feelings rigorously conditioned to own and to respond sexually only to select human bodies as ownable objects—these practical distinctions have a visceral common theme.

Marriage, rape, and prostitution may feel quite dissimilar to the owned—and the relational particulars may feel quite distinct to owners too. But to penised human beings committed to manhood, the

eroticism of owning feels all alike in the dark: It is the feeling of owning someone's body in sex. It is the feeling of being the man there. It is the feeling of having a certifiable and superior social gender. It is the passion of sexual possession. It is the subjectivity of fucking like a real man.

The practical particulars of the economic arrangement may vary: whether the ownership is long-term or short-term, whether there is purchase or theft, whether the owner has sexual access to more than one ownable at a time, whether the ownable has been optioned or leased or mass-produced or agented, whether the ownable is an independent contractor. But the eroticism of owning is a constant. The eroticism of owning is how penised human beings get to feel like the man there.

I want to suggest that recognizing and naming the eroticism of owning has implications for the work of eliminating systems of prostitution—implications that are both practical and radical.

For one thing, the eroticism of owning pervades patriarchal law. It wrote the book.

Laws preserve men's proprietary relation to other people's bodies in sex. That's what patriarchal law has always been *for*. Essentially the law has been an instrument of ownership of human flesh by selectively entitled human beings. The law *codifies* phallic possession, sorts it out, sets forth which human flesh *can* be owned and fucked, which human flesh *cannot* be owned and fucked, and which human flesh *must* be owned and fucked.<sup>4</sup> The law thus codifies oppression through possession.

There will be no real escape from oppression until gender itself has ended. There will be no freedom, no equality, no human dignity, no justice, until the time comes when owning someone in sex is no longer what anyone needs or wants in order to feel they belong to a sex class. And when that time comes, there will be no sex classes to belong to.

We cannot grapple with the law's governance of prostitution and the law's protection of pornography and the law's administration of heterosexuality and the law's jurisdiction in rape without keeping clear—absolutely clear—about the law's continued investment in proprietary sexuality. The law is a social institution that functions to create, maintain, and enforce the sex-class system by maintaining and enforcing the eroticism of owning—in order that humans born penised will have a socially superior sex class to belong to.

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4. This interpretation is based on ANDREA DWORKIN, *INTERCOURSE* (1987).

To confront the sex-class system, we have to confront the eroticism of owning. We cannot go after the bad kind and leave the good kind alone. There is no good kind.

When we challenge systems of prostitution and trafficking in women—when we challenge pimps and profiteers, when we challenge male-supremacist lawmakers and judges, when we challenge pornographers, when we challenge heads of state—we dare not demur or deny that we are indeed seriously intending to root out the eroticism of owning entirely.

No one has the right to *own* anyone else's body—not in order to *have* sex, not in order to have *a* sex. No one—no human being. ♪