

The Stealthing Panic: Gendered Neoliberalism in Online Media

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UNTIL EARLY 2017 FEW PEOPLE HAD HEARD OF, LET ALONE THOUGHT CRITICALLY about, 'stealthing' (Brodsky). A search of writing referencing the term before then yields a clutch of academic papers (for example: Hammond, Holmes and Mercier; Klein) but no notable mainstream discourse. The question of who was removing or otherwise tampering with condoms was a relatively minor concern in the realm of sexual uncertainty. Indeed, the term stealthing used to be malleable; prior to 2017 it referred to any kind of condom-tampering. Now, however, it means only one thing: the intentional removal of a condom by a male, deliberately undertaken without the knowledge or consent of his sexual partner. An online search yields hundreds of thousands of results and the term is used by columnists, news anchors and laypeople the world over.

In this essay, I examine the very recent historical interest in the act of stealthing through the lens of moral panic theory. The objects of moral panics remain magical figures, folk devils (S. Cohen), and their expulsion or condemnation continues to cohere communities and individuals around shared moral norms and social institutions. From a functionalist perspective (for example, Douglas, *Risk and Blame*), moral panics reinforce symbolic boundaries, shoring up individual and community identities. Seen in this light, a moral panic is an extreme manifestation of a process that is always at work as 'a community reaches for cultural

homogeneity' by, among other things, signposting 'major moments of choice with dangers' (Douglas, 'Risk' 6).

I first demonstrate that the panic around the stealthier marries with a tradition of scholarly work on moral panics. The stealthier, as captured by Brodsky in her explosive 2017 article for the *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, and reproduced in hundreds of media articles since, bears a striking resemblance to the objects of a series of recent moral panics. The panic itself affirms the identities of participants along functionalist lines, granting those individuals purpose in a broad community of online media claims-makers and panic-stokers. It is symptomatic, I argue, of those participants' misrecognition of the sources of anxieties regarding the safety of women's bodies, rendering online media largely and increasingly impotent as a source or locus for political awakening or structural change.

I then examine the role of moral entrepreneurs in the stealthing panic, and specifically their imbrication in online media. Becker (145) introduced the concept of the moral entrepreneur to describe an individual or group who exploits 'the creation of a new fragment of the moral constitution of society, its code of right and wrong'. What is entrepreneurial about this act is the 'use of causal narratives as a political instrument to attach solutions to problems' (Pepin-Neff and Caporale 7). Moral entrepreneurs' goal is to 'convince others that containment, punishment, banishment, or destruction of the person or persons designated as scapegoat will set things right' (Lancaster 24).

What is relatively novel about the role of moral entrepreneurs in the stealthing panic, I suggest, is that the majority of them are not so much moral entrepreneurs as moral-entrepreneurial intermediaries (MEIs), whose livelihoods and status depend in significant part on the creation and escalation of moral panics, rather than on their control. This represents a commoditisation of the 'routinization of panic' (Lancaster 13), whereby groups of people have become symbolically and financially dependent on stoking panic in a routine way.

The content produced by these MEIs also highlights the gendered neoliberalism of the stealthing panic, which I propose is complementary to neoliberal feminism's emphasis on happiness, balance and 'leaning in' (Rottenberg). In the stealthing panic, key elements of neoliberal rationality such as punishment and surveillance are offered to and operationalised on behalf of women as a means of finding empowerment and safety, thereby compelling them to ever more deeply occupy neoliberal subjectivities. Drawing on Wacquant's (*Punishing*) work on the neoliberal 'centaur state,' I propose that this aspect of gendered neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al.) may be an integral companion of neoliberal feminism.

Lastly, I address the current status of the stealthing panic and changes in the coverage of stealthing in the two years since it emerged. In particular, I highlight the fact that stealthing has already come to be thought of as a commonplace; any scepticism around its reality, urgency or ubiquity remains difficult to find. It is my ultimate aim to prove that the meteoric rise of interest in stealthing is a symptom of the ongoing neoliberalisation of Western capitalist society, where responsabilisation, individualisation and increasingly harsh punishments by the state are all that is reached for, and therefore all that is received. I highlight this point through concluding comparisons between neoliberal humanitarianism and key aspects of the stealthing panic.

'Rape-adjacent': The Seed of a Moral Panic

Stealthing as a cause for alarm came to international prominence suddenly and with great clarity in April 2017. The ostensible cause was an academic paper by Yale law graduate Alexandra Brodsky (2017): "Rape-Adjacent": Imagining Legal Responses to Nonconsensual Condom Removal'. Published in the *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* on 20 April 2017, the paper defined stealthing as 'the practice of nonconsensually removing condoms during sex' (Brodsky 184). It was based on telephone and email interviews with at least four women who had been stealthed by a male partner (Brodsky names four women; the total number interviewed is unclear), and a woman who, having worked in a rape crisis centre, had spoken to an unspecified number of women who had also been stealthed. Stealthing, Brodsky's interviewees suggested, may not be rape, but at the level of a violation of consent, it feels like rape, a fact that led Brodsky to write the paper, asking how legal recourse for this event might effectively bring justice to what she terms 'victims' or 'survivors'.

Also included in Brodsky's paper were conclusions about the motives of men who stealth. These conclusions were formed based on one page of a website that had been deleted, a cached version of which Brodsky provided a link to (Bentson), one blog post (Onesickmind) and the comments on that post. The site and the blog post were written by men who claimed to have stealthed people and wanted to instruct others how do it. From these, Brodsky formed a portrait of the stealther as a man whose motivations may be 'increased physical pleasure, [or] a thrill from degradation', but who is more likely stealthing because he supports 'an ideology of male supremacy in which violence is man's natural right', and therefore sees ejaculating inside a person 'as a natural male instinct' and right (Brodsky 189). Importantly, Brodsky (185) asserted based on her findings that stealthing is a 'common practice'.

Prior to Brodsky's paper, stealthing had only been studied in relation to men who have sex with men (MSM) and the transmission of human immunodeficiency virus

(HIV) between them. There, stealthing referred to any kind of sabotage of a condom, not limited to its removal, with the intention of transmitting HIV to a sexual partner without their knowledge or consent (Hammond, Holmes and Mercier; Klein). While Brodsky's (2017) paper does draw on the account of a gay man whose advice about how to stealth is explicitly directed at MSM, and who is also instructive about how to remove someone else's condom (Bentson), Brodsky redefines the acts and actions fundamental to the term. In her paper, stealthing is condom removal only, and it is explicitly perpetrated by a man performing sexual penetration. It is not, as Bentson's webpage suggested, something a person being sexually penetrated might want or covertly arrange.

These limitations on the physical act of stealthing bind the act of penetration with the perpetration of deception, and because Brodsky's accounts of stealthing all come from women, the person in her paper being deceived and penetrated is coded female. With this change, what is dangerous about stealthing is also redefined. The riskiness of stealthing is now related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) generally, unwanted pregnancy and the issue of consent violation, which situates it within a decades-long history of feminist activism in which rape, and therefore consent violation, is portrayed as a 'women's issue' (Javaid). This lifts stealthing from one socio-political arena, where medical concerns about the transmission of HIV were the justification for its study, and places it into another, where the historically encoded notion of women's bodies as vulnerable to sexual abuse by men (Bumiller) takes precedence, rendering it a women's criminal justice concern.

'A Disturbing Sex Trend': How You Came to Know about Stealthing

How Brodsky's paper of 20 April 2017 first became the basis of news stories is unclear, but before the end of that month, articles about stealthing had appeared in *USA Today* (Glasser) and on American blogs and news websites, describing a 'growing movement of men' (Lawson) indulging in a 'disturbing sex trend' that is 'on the rise' (Glasser). As early, in fact, as 22 April 2017, the *Huffington Post* (Hatch) had interviewed Brodsky, calling her paper a 'deep dive into the online world of men' who derive pleasure from stealthing. Only days later, news anchors were asking their audiences whether it should be a crime to remove a condom during sex (10News and Glasser 2017), and 'corrective' narratives had appeared, arguing stealthing is sexual assault and rape and should be referred to as such (Holden; Seelinger).

By May 2017 the story had gone global, with stories in Ireland, Australia, the United Kingdom and across the USA expounding people's need to know about stealthing (Fustich; Hack 'Manipulation'; Loreto; Mammoser; O'Rourke 'It's a Crime'; Bonos). The case for understanding stealthing as a form of rape or sexual

assault had also been bolstered (Maullin; Mitchum; Suslovic). The authoritativeness of Brodsky's paper, meanwhile, seemed to have passed beyond question, with some sites even calling it a 'survey' (for example, McNamara), implying a degree of empirical breadth in no way present.

Calls for and investigations into the legal options for prosecuting stealthers, which had been present from the outset, soon grew in number (McVeigh; O'Rourke 'It's a Crime'; Siemaszko; Ulloa; Mascali). Oft-cited at this time, in the manner of an example of what can be achieved, was the conviction of a Swiss man for rape for non-consensual condom removal (for example, Reuters). In Australia, ABC station triple j's radio program Hack ('Why I Stealth') conducted a phone interview, broadcast to a national audience, with the pseudonymous 'Brendan', a self-confessed stealter. During his brief interview, 'Brendan' showed total disregard for the supposed 'risks' of stealthing to himself and his sexual partners. That interview served as the basis for conclusions about the motivations of stealthers everywhere (News.com.au) and was reframed as 'breaking news' as late as August 2017 (O'Rourke 'It Feels Better').

The supposed urgency and ubiquity of stealthing continued to compel contributions and responses as the year passed its halfway mark. Stories describing experiences of being stealthed multiplied (Hack 'Manipulation'; Maullin; Grant-Geary 'Brisbane Woman'; Grant-Geary 'Stealthing'), as did those about how women can protect themselves (for example, Pemberton). Between June and September 2017, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) proposed legislation to criminalise stealthing (Burgess); 'high culture' journals took up the topic (Trayhurn); Australian Member of Parliament and Deputy Leader of the Opposition Tanya Plibersek (in Rushton) labelled stealthing 'reproductive coercion', and repeated the logically fallacious leap from definition to prevalence, observing, 'It's disturbing that this [stealthing] is so common it has a name'; and the TV channel BBC3 in England announced that stealthing was to be one topic in a documentary called *Sex, Lies and Deception*, which links sex being a 'swipe away' (a reference to dating apps) to 'new' forms of sexual assault (Chignall).

In short, stealthing and the figure evoked by Brodsky's redefinition of it provoked an international media, legal and political furore based on no authoritative, current evidence of prevalence or motive. Even if you take a most uncritical reading of the recent interest in stealthing—for example, that Brodsky gave light to a heretofore unnamed but globally prevalent phenomenon, paving the way for others to '[recognise] a previously unknown reality' (Fassin, 'Humanitarian Politics' 532)—the fact that the paper did (is still doing) so 'well' merits examination.

The attention it drew is astounding in its scope and intensity. For example, as of December 2018, the Social Science Research Network's statistics alone have Brodsky's paper downloaded 13,091 times, the abstract viewed over 95,000 times, and its 'ranking' on their website in the top two-hundred and forty papers in the world out of more than 630,000 (SSRN 2018). The article's impact goes beyond the resonance of the lived experiences it documents. Stealthing, previously only a niche concern in the study of MSM, has now been depicted in familiar form so widely and with such crisp repetitiveness that it is worthwhile to speak of stealthing and the stealter as cultural and political objects as much as they are experienced realities.

'Out of all Proportion': Stealthing as a Moral Panic in Online Media

Drawing on Stanley Cohen's (S. Cohen) seminal 1972 work on moral panic, the means of identifying a moral panic were succinctly articulated by Hall et al. when their book, *Policing the Crisis*, was first published in 1978:

When the official reaction to a person, group of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors *perceive* the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty', above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic*.
(20)

Scholars have since traced the emergence in the West of a host of moral panics around different risk objects: child physical abuse, AIDS, welfare cheats, heroin addicts, pornography and the sexually deviant man in various guises: 'the rapist, the serial killer, the child molester, the ritual or satanic child abuser, and the child murderer' (Jenkins 9). Each of these had roots in fact, though usually in as few as one event. Nevertheless, each was escalated to the status of a societal emergency, leading to increases in, and the expansion of options for, punishing those accused of perpetrating the associated act.

The stealthing panic is no different. No empirical evidence of either incidence or prevalence was offered as the basis for conclusions about the ubiquity of stealthing or the men perpetrating it. Instead, so-called experts were deferred to, starting with Brodsky herself. Media sources, where they did not simply cite Brodsky's article as authoritative in itself, supplemented it with the expert testimony of others, many the exact kind of police, judiciary and editorial figures

Hall et al. predict will be engaged (see, for example, Faruqi; McVeigh; O'Rourke 'It's a Crime'; Maullin). Together, these experts were uniform in both their premises and prognoses: stealthing is a nascent moral evil, and education, harsher laws and penalties, or both, are required to prevent it.

Jenkins (4-5) argues that a constructionist's theorising of the origins of a moral panic tends to skew either towards a community-based rationale or a class-based rationale. In the former, a community is seen to be affirming its normative values via highlighting and expelling those who have violated its norms. In the latter, misrecognition of the sources of a community's anxiety in each other's supposed transgressions distracts from systematic oppression, dispossession or exploitation, for example by a state dominated by elite interests. I propose that while non-consensual condom removal is real, 'stealthing' as a source of panic has been socially constructed for reasons of both value-affirmation and misrecognition.

The stealthing panic was driven in large part by individuals improving their individual standing within neoliberalised online media. Online media's positioning within capitalist economies of exchange means that it presents its goods first as items for consumption. Its delivering up of content, in the form of essays, think-pieces and memes, to a competitive marketplace means that the 'principles of evaluation' (Bourdieu, *Field* 6) applied to its products are, at root, market principles. The stealthing panic's proponents are therefore in a subservient relationship to the forces of capital. A media item that at first appears to be a contribution to public thought around women's public and personal safety in fact primarily constitutes a means by which directly and indirectly monetised practices such as amassing 'social media "followers", "likes", and "retweets" ... [enhance] the self's future value' (Brown, W 34). A successful writer is therefore structurally dependent on the logics of capital and self-enhancement, and is ultimately seeking to cement their place in this cultural and economic community.

This is strongly conducive to misrecognition, whereby a subjective social reality is built on false perceptions of the objective conditions of reality (Bourdieu *Logic*). There is no objective social reality to speak of in the stealthing panic. Nevertheless, it responds, broadly speaking, to anxieties around the real physical insecurity of women's bodies. Misrecognition occurs here in two senses: first, in the implicit proposal that the insecurity of women is not a result of structural forces but of pathological individuals; and second, in the explicit proposal that execrating the figure of the stealthier represents a remedy to that insecurity. That this misrecognition leads to often monetised calls for greater degrees of punitive justice is emblematic of a neoliberal consciousness, which, feeling anxiety to be 'the relational mode of the age' (Penny), responds with vengeful yet trusting appeal to the state. Because online media's logics are principally those of the

market and its mind-set is distinctly neoliberal, it is, and its members are, closer to what Bourdieu (*Field* 23) termed ‘a proletaroid intelligentsia’, and its capacity to act as a ‘solvent’ for doxa (Wacquant ‘Critical Thought’), or taken-for-granted untruths, is compromised.

‘Gendered Neoliberalism’: Moral-entrepreneurial Intermediaries in the Stealthing Panic

Typical moral entrepreneurs (Becker) come forward dictate a panic’s narrative, cementing themselves as arbiters of societal good, exposing the currents of anxiety that are there for the tapping. Brodsky, for example, fits this characterisation. In her glossing of the ‘partial portrait’ (Fordham 20) of the stealther she proposed, her recourse to emotive concepts and her proposal that her field of expertise was well placed to provide a solution, Brodsky behaved as a moral entrepreneur. The most obvious ‘traditional-model’ moral entrepreneurs to follow in Brodsky’s footsteps were politicians, who emerged to take an uncritical stand against the practice of stealthing (see Ulloa; McNamara; Mascali; Rushton; Burgess; Sacks), positioning themselves as the vanguard of a morally righteous and effective fight against this ‘sick practice’ (Siemaszko).

In the online realm where the stealthing panic first blossomed and continues to be stoked, however, the moral entrepreneurialism of bloggers and journalists is not so simple as Becker’s original theorisation allowed. I propose that these actors are not in fact moral entrepreneurs but rather moral-entrepreneurial intermediaries (MEIs), dependent on the creation and tapping of moral panics yet not interested in their control. Rather, they seek to leverage knowledge of panics to arouse interest from and provoke action by more powerful social actors, a practice which aspires to demonstrate their individual value to societally subordinate firms such as online media sites.

This is symptomatic, I propose, of the commoditisation of the ‘routinisation of panic’ (Lancaster). The routinisation of panic refers to an unceasing flow of objects of danger—street crime, crack wars, predatory gangs, terrorists—drummed up to the point that society views the creation of exceptional measures for their control as nothing out of the ordinary and, moreover, essential to the proper functioning of society. The righteous capture and incarceration of offenders makes of this process a ‘pornographic politics of punishment’, at once ‘a lurid media spectacle and a permanent theater of morality’ (Wacquant, *Punishing* 239-43). None of this has to do with actually reducing insecurity, but it does produce an environment in which a society approves of the ‘state of panic ... [being] written at the heart of the law, which provides norms’ (Lancaster 96).

This routinisation of panic has married with structural economic factors to foster routine dependence on panic as a means of finding or retaining employment. The mass media has long been strengthening its position as a key identifier of and claims-maker about reasons for panic (S. Cohen 9-10). What has changed is that thousands of individual claims-makers now proactively correspond and coordinate with online media outlets to produce and compound these claims. Whether they are salaried journalists, contract writers, unpaid contributors or interns, MEIs are similarly compelled by the real or anticipated rewards of money or status, the line between which has been blurred for those bearing the brunt of the flexibilisation of the global workforce (Harvey), among other things.

These individuals are, generationally speaking, the first-adopters of total entrepreneurial selves, what Brown describes as ‘an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues’ (Brown, W 10). Everything about MEIs, including their sexual presentation and political affiliations, is part of the means by which they improve their standing. In his classic 1972 study of moral panic, Cohen distinguished between those who exploit and amplify deviance for commercial reasons and those who do it for ideological reasons. In the new media landscape, they are one and the same.

Within a week of the publication of Brodsky’s article, for example, stealthing had been escalated across multiple moral boundaries by MEIs. One blog equated stealthing with ‘aggravated assault’ and wilfully poisoning someone (Seelinger). Other sites published articles about stealthing under headlines like ‘Why You Should Call “Stealthing” What It Really Is: Rape’ (Holden). Such headlines became commonplace in stealthing coverage (for example, Mitchum; Dixon-Smith; S. Doyle), as did the use of other escalating phrases such as reproductive coercion (Rushton), sexual predators (Siemaszko) and trauma (Grant-Geary ‘Brisbane Woman’). Thus, stealthing was rapidly advanced across a new ‘threshold of victimization’ (Jenkins 11) and the associated legal-moral-political boundaries. Also key to this escalation was the idea that this act was perpetrated by a community of men (Hatch), or more ominously, a ‘sub-community’ (Trayhurn). Making an abusive event seem ‘conspiratorial’ emphasises the seriousness of the danger and removes ‘capriciousness’ from the situation (S. Cohen 64). And yet, because the ultimate intention of the creators of this trajectory was not to permanently harness themselves to it but simply to provoke its ascent, all this was not accomplished by traditional moral entrepreneurs.

For the MEIs who moralistically intone about causes of and solutions to stealthing, yet are not outright authority figures, stoking panic is not about leadership, it is about status and, by association, money. As Doyle has argued, nowadays ‘it’s the

job of young people to design personal brand strategies and sell themselves' (B. Doyle 18). Where these individuals are seeking work in politicised environments, such as progressive, conservative and/or women-focused mass media, their political ideologies have become an asset to, even a required component of, that brand. Online media, then, is structurally dependent on individuals who are ultimately selling themselves. And where the moral and the economic have merged, panic is both ideological and mundane, at once their passion, job and means of securing their future.

The self-positioning of MEIs in supposed opposition to major social institutions is in fact artificial. Indeed, in the indistinguishability of stealthing coverage by progressive, conservative and mainstream media, one sees the total confluence of the socio-political norms to which they appeal. These MEIs and their publishers rarely challenge the media's tendency to be 'overall, a factor of depoliticization' (Bourdieu, *Acts* 73), and may more accurately be described as 'a propagandistic extension of policing and prosecution' (Lancaster 118). In light of the existence of MEIs and the economic arrangement in society of online media (and mass media generally), panics are likelier than ever to occur and recur, due to unprecedentedly widespread financial and symbolic interest in their routinisation.

This is especially so in the case of stealthing, as it has become a commonplace, 'notions or theses *with* which one argues but *over* which there is no argument' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2). In early October 2017, for example, after a subsidence in coverage of stealthing, two US Democratic Representatives wrote to the US House Judiciary Committee, urging them to determine what legal responses 'experts' think would help resolve the 'problem' of stealthing (Sacks). The Representatives' letter reiterated the fallacious centrepieces of the panic *ad nauseum* (Oppenheim), again without provoking noticeable dissent. This initiated a new flurry of coverage as far away as India, Romania, Brazil and Mexico (TNN; Libertatea.ro; Nonato; W Radio), where coverage reiterated the practice's ubiquity, illegality, immorality and violence. Coverage in the West revisited the panic's familiar themes, only this time in more explicit, urgent terms (for example, Andersen; Marmalade).

More recently still, mention of stealthing has been interwoven with coverage of the sexual assault allegations of the #MeToo movement (for example, Toglia; Kent). In Canada, responses to stealthing have become a means of judging university campus responses to sexual violence (B. Crawford). And the flow of articles on major media outlets calling for stealthers to be prosecuted carried on into 2018 (for example, Reiss; Williams). The matter-of-fact manner in which stealthing is now mentioned means it is highly susceptible to unremarked manipulation in future (Jenkins). And, as mentioned above, it is in the interests of MEIs to deploy it; MEIs who, by continuously producing a large and cumulative

body of accessible reports, marry perfectly with the structural prerequisites of panics' emergence and recurrence (Jenkins 12).

This individualising trend, as it manifested in the #MeToo movement, which has overlapped with the stealthing panic and in which it is now imbricated, has been tied to the neoliberalisation of feminism. As Duggan, Matthews, Sanín and Kipnis have all pointed out, the focus on single relationship vectors between a victim and their accuser(s) in the #MeToo movement, to the exclusion of structural critiques of political and economic power, provides only 'an image of freedom' (Sanín 128) within a compromised structure. Rottenberg has since written compellingly of neoliberal feminism, highlighting a recent turn to happiness and balance as aspirational feminist ideals at the same time as 'autonomy, rights, liberation and social justice' have receded from 'public feminist discussions' (in Banet-Weiser et al. 5). Online media's handling of the stealthing panic has certainly been part of this dedicatedly non-structural approach to women's so-called wellbeing.

What may yet be incorporated into analysis of neoliberal feminism is its relationship with the punitive reasoning of 'gendered neoliberalism' (Banet-Weiser et al. 14). The 'brutally paternalistic and punitive' elements of the neoliberal state earned it the moniker 'centaur state' from Wacquant (*Punishing* 43), as the state's liberal aspects, directed towards those at its head, depend on its violence to those beneath its hooves, whom it neglects and disadvantages. It is possible that neoliberal feminism's emphasis on balance, happiness and 'leaning in' is equally dependent on a rhetoric of punishment, scapegoating and surveillance not of the self, but of others. Gendered neoliberalism is understood to make endless demands of individual women, blaming and surveilling them as it elides the culpability of patriarchal capitalist institutions of power (Banet-Weiser et al.), but it may also be thought of as inviting women to participate in the doing of violence to others, justifying and broadening the appeal of neoliberal subjectivity through the gendering of neoliberal rhetoric.

Mass participation in the gendered labelling, stigmatisation and excoriation of 'deviant others', as occurred during the stealthing panic, demonstrates the appeal of punishment and surveillance as something women (and their self-proclaimed champions) can and should use to their advantage. Rottenberg (20) argues that neoliberal feminism 'facilitates the creation of new and intensified forms of racialized and class-stratified gender exploitation'. It may be the case that gendered neoliberalism, as seen in the stealthing panic, is not simply facilitating but managing to actively effect these stratifications through the use and participation of women.

‘Trojan Horses’: The Stealthing Panic, Neoliberalism and Humanitarianism

In order to create analytical and political solidarities with existing research in the field of neoliberalism and Western society, I now wish to examine the similarities between the work of MEIs and the work of those in the field of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism depends, argues Fassin, on a politics of testimony, one which is produced by humanitarian actors on behalf of subjects of violence who are silenced in the process. Importantly, it favours ‘the vocabulary of psychology’ rather than the language of revolution (Fassin, ‘Humanitarian Politics’ 532). ‘Inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, [and] violence is expressed in terms of trauma’ (Fassin *Humanitarian Reason* 6). It therefore elicits moral sentiment via what Berlant (58) called ‘a politics of true feeling’, using ‘the register of emotion’ (Fassin, ‘Humanitarian Politics’ 548) to ‘[generate] the moral indignation that can prompt action to end [misfortune]’ (Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason* 1). This affective politics of testimony therefore has a dual register: ‘affect is present both as that which testifies (the suffering of the people) and that which is produced by the testimony (the public’s compassion)’ (Fassin, ‘Humanitarian Politics’ 539).

Moral-entrepreneurial intermediaries operate in much the same way, producing the same paradoxical and problematic outcomes. As Fassin points out, the creation of subjects in moralised registers has the effect of producing subjectivities and compelling individuals to inhabit them (‘Humanitarian Politics’). This is a symptom of the inequality that is essential to a relationship between a ‘victim’ and someone seeking to act on ‘the principle of altruism’ (Fassin ‘Humanitarianism’ 507). If a benefactor allots aid on certain bases, it is in the subject’s interest to align with them. In the stealthing panic, women as victims are essentialised, and act to essentialise themselves, through the offering-up of testimonies of victimhood. Because MEIs sacralise life and valorise suffering (Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason* 248), they pay little attention to their subjects’ ‘biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence’ (254). MEIs therefore reify the victimhood of those on whose behalf they purport to speak. This humanitarianisation of gendered violence likely compounds the victimhood of women and the vilification of their supposed aggressors, all the while reifying the divides on which this ontology depends.

Humanitarianism has also come to act as an ideological apparatus of the neoliberal state, and there are commonalities between its role and the relationship of MEIs to the state in the stealthing panic. Exemplary of this phenomenon is the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which since the mid-1980s have formed a pivotal part of global neoliberal reform agendas, aiming to make profitable, privatise and decentralise state services around the globe (Pfeiffer and Chapman 151). This inevitably leads to widespread discontent, and NGOs, argues Petras

'come into the picture to mystify and deflect that discontent away from direct attacks on the corporate/banking power structure and profits' ('NGOs' 430). By setting up a buffer between the popular will and its capacity to influence local, state and NGO agendas (Ganti 97), NGOs function as 'Trojan horses for global neoliberalism' (Harvey 177). They mute oppositional politics by conjuring the idea of valuable democratic participation in pursuit of their discrete goals. What is more, due to their dependence on funding from foreign governments and major financial institutions, NGOs are not really non-governmental at all (Petras 'NGOs'), and function to sanitise as 'globalisation' what is in fact imperialism (Petras and Veltmeyer).

This co-option of the humanitarian project, construed as part of a newly invigorated 'civil society', gives precedent to the emergence of MEIs. Drawing on the Marxist notion of the superstructure of capitalism, Bruce Cohen, following Gramsci (Gramsci), argues that through institutions in civil society such as 'religion, education, the media, and the family', a capitalist elite is able to 'naturalise and reinforce the norms and values of capital through professional claims-making' (B. M. Z. Cohen 68). Importantly, civil society's 'is a form of *negotiated* power in which professional groups and institutions can act in semi-autonomous and sometimes oppositional directions to capital' (B. M. Z. Cohen 72).

My proposal here is that, mistaking dependence on neoliberal institutions of power for a degree of influence over them, MEIs, like NGOs, come to entrench rather than pose any real threat to the 'hegemony of ideas' (Petras, 'Left Strikes Back' 7) in the neoliberal doctrine. This is not merely the colonisation of gender-based social reform by neoliberal ideology, but rather forms part of what Rottenberg (2018:15) has described as the 'cultural purpose' of 'neoliberal feminism': 'it hollows out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to provide a critique of ... social injustices ... and in this way further entrenches neoliberal rationality' (Rottenberg 15).

The 'political anesthetizing effect' (Rottenberg 5) of neoliberal feminism, and what I have argued is its necessary shadow, punitive gendered neoliberalism, as practiced by MEIs, takes the shape of the potential of organised revolution being supplanted by the power of knowledge and the capacity to punish others. The perception that this is effective likely helps to shore up MEIs' sense of the validity of their work, dependent as they are on the financial and symbolic power deriving from their imbrication in a 'knowledge economy'. In seeking to accumulate financial and symbolic capital, however, MEIs are an equally complicit if less institutionalised means than NGOs by which the norms and values of capital and neoliberal rationality are reinforced.

Conclusion

Online media is a practically infinite and infinitely contested space, and neoliberalism is a process—protean, as Peck and Tickell put it. This essay may therefore be guilty of proposing theory in the way of ethnography, '[circumscribing] the ethnographic view' (Biehl 587). This is not, however, its intention, and the specificity provided by the known facts of the stealthing panic provides more than enough concrete data to reach a few important conclusions.

The first of these is that stealthing, in its reliance on stereotypes, its disproportionality and its instigation and tapping by moral entrepreneurs, is the object of a classic moral panic. It involves 'moral-entrepreneurial intermediaries', within whom the divide between political and economic motives are dissolved. It is their presence, among other things, that explains why the stealthing panic, like all panics, is not bounded or complete, and why it and others like it will recur. It therefore forms part of the routinisation of panic (Lancaster), whereby new laws are written and social norms are constantly re-inscribed in society in response to what are painted as novel, extreme threats. It is also a neoliberal panic, its central themes being responsabilisation, individualism, punishment and neoconservative morality. Specifically, it features a gendered neoliberalism that makes the language of surveillance and punishment specially applicable to women and those who would supposedly act in their interests.

My analysis of humanitarianism under neoliberal capitalism shows the stealthing panic to have parallels in the behaviour of MEIs during the stealthing panic. The affective register of humanitarianism, whereby it both creates and comes to depend on inequalities, is mirrored in the work of MEIs in the stealthing panic. And humanitarianism and a significant portion of online media have come to stand in for meaningful political change at exactly the moment the deprivations of neoliberal capitalism are fomenting will for it. In their false representation of themselves as a means of meaningful political participation, MEIs help to redirect justified political discontent into circumscribed, sanitised, for-profit forms.

That 'there *is* uncertainty' (Jenkins, Jessen and Steffen 21) is existential, which means that '[freedom] from fear is a mythical premise' (Roiphe 47). The manner in which we respond to this uncertainty and fear, however, is open to change. At the level of prevention, the stealthing panic in its initial formulation might have been prevented by some simple measures. The state could implement non-reciprocal caretaking of citizens and non-citizens, such as paying for the contraceptive pill and for condoms, as well as for STI screenings and treatments, the morning-after pill and abortion procedures, childcare, menstrual hygiene products, and substantive maternity and paternity leave. This would undoubtedly

have flow-on effects with regard to formation and perception of stigma around sexual uncertainty.

Ethnography, meanwhile, might yet address itself to this panic's non-specificity. The way maleness is embodied and practiced, for example, is understudied (Peterson and Lupton), but is especially so in relation to the 'central power-holders' (Heyman 178) in neoliberal capitalism and the paternalist portrait of the neoliberal state offered by Wacquant (*Punishing*). Taking a literal approach to the question of non-consensual condom removal, we might ask why such an act occurs. Hammond, Holmes and Mercier (272) have theorised condoms as interfering objects of the state, and shown that barebacking, stealthing's terminological predecessor, can be a means of creating solidarities that 'keep gay culture alive'. To a heterosexual man, non-consensual condom removal could be a form of edgework (Lyng), a grasp at 'a dramatic self within a world of alienation and over-socialization' (Collison 435). Alternatively, it could simply be a result of 'the minimal cognition involved in sexual decision-making, including the willingness to have risky sex' (Halperin 54). An ethnographic approach might begin to demystify and reduce the act of stealthing to its proper proportions, frustrating its capacity to instil fear.

With regard to this essay's theorising of punitive gendered neoliberalism's relationship to neoliberal feminism, a further line of enquiry might examine if the two can be supplanted, and if so, by appealing to what. Punishment and surveillance have always been fundamental to the appeal of neoliberalism; to use them 'as women' or 'on behalf of women,' however, clearly has wide and current appeal. Rottenberg argues that a radical solidarity based on awareness of and resistance to precarity might provide the basis of broad resistance to neoliberal feminism's individualising capacities. Any such resistance must also counteract and undermine the appeal of punishing perceived wrongdoers, a key tenet of the appeal of gendered neoliberalism, thereby presenting feminism with an ideological companion as compelling as neoliberalism, and as likely to reap meaningful change in the organisation of society.

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