

Emily Ratajkowski & Naomi Wolf team up to sell Playboy Feminism

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<http://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/07/12/emily-ratajkowski-remains-confused-difference-female-body-sexualizing-female-body/>

What could be even more provocative than an interview with a naked lady talking about the innate empowerment of self-objectification? An interview with a naked lady about the innate empowerment of self-objectification conducted by Naomi Wolf.

In the [July issue](#) of Harper's Bazaar, actress and model Emily Ratajkowski [reasserts](#) her inability to separate "sexualization" from the biological fact of having a female body to Wolf, who declares her "an outspoken feminist." Wolf defends her statement by reminding the reader that Ratajkowski "challeng[ed] the haters with a topless, in-your-face Instagram alongside Kim Kardashian." In case you don't recall, this "challenging" of "the haters" looked like this:

In your face, haters!

Ratajkowski has been working this "sexualization = liberation" angle since she first discovered it, back when she starred in the video for Robin Thicke's rape anthem, "Blurred Lines," wherein she played the role of "naked accessory." When questioned about whether or not the video was sexist, she [told Esquire](#), "I think it's actually celebrating women and their bodies."

Wolf, who lost the plot long ago and, apparently, never recovered it, expresses enthusiasm at Ratajkowski's Slutwalk/Playboy Feminism ideology. "Her politics," Wolf writes, "especially about the body (show it off), attention (why should women not want it?), assertion, and self-acceptance occurred to me as mostly very good news." Wolf, like the third wave she's aligned herself with, accepts an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach, seeing self-objectification as the only possible solution to porn culture:

"Her peers, the children of a pornographic culture, are doing just what they should do, given the wash of objectified, naked bodies everywhere. They are engaged in establishing a new narrative to reclaim the body..."

Wolf views this as a more positive approach, contrasted with the "sober puritans of feminism of yore." This assessment is particularly amusing as Wolf is not only almost two decades older than me, but because feminists young and old abandoned Wolf's feminism back in 2011, when she defended Julian Assange against rape charges and accused his victims of using feminism to "[assuage... personal injured feelings](#)," and then again when she published a [self-helpy](#) book about the Vagina, chalk-full of bad science and essentialism. I suppose it's possible that Wolf's acknowledged that the "sober puritans of feminism yore" aren't buying her brand, so hey, time to start fresh with a naive new generation. While she does admit to wishing Ratajkowski "could have a huge career and keep her shirt on," I mean, what can ya do? If I recall correctly, "What choice do we have" has always been the rallying call of the radical feminist movement.

Ratajkowski, as she also wrote about in her [essay for Lenny](#) earlier this year, tells Wolf she was sexualized at an early age... Well, she doesn't say it quite like that...

She says, “I genuinely hit puberty before everyone. So I really was more sexual than my classmates.” What she means, though, is not that she literally was “more sexual,” but that she had the body of a woman and was sexualized by those around her because of it.

It certainly was not Ratajkowski’s fault that she was treated this way, and yes, she should be able to wear whatever she wants to wear, without being treated as an object by those around her. But what is absolutely baffling to me is that not only can Ratajkowski not discern a difference between feeling sexual and having a body or wearing clothes that is perceived as being sexual, but Wolf, a long-time, well-known feminist cannot either.

“Thong or no thong,” Wolf says, “or overalls or shave your head or not. If they have a problem with my sexuality, that’s their problem.” What thongs and overalls have to do with sexuality is never explained, alas. I love overalls, as did Andrea Dworkin, and she’d have been as curious as I to how they connect to female sexuality. I know men are always wearing or not wearing overalls and thongs and not thongs, then shouting, fists up, “If you have a problem with my sexuality, that’s your problem!” If it’s good for the gander...

This comment naturally leads Wolf to ask about the topless selfie with Kim K, which was posted in response to Kim’s [effort to liberate women](#) by tweeting a photo of her breasts:

“We’ve gotten to ground zero of this whole conversation, which is that there’s still the fear and contempt of female sexuality and the just intolerable cultural reaction when women take ownership of their sexuality and their bodies.”

(Like, as if the way women are going to take “ownership of their sexuality and their bodies” is by posting photoshopped versions of it on the internet for men to jack off to.)

Ratajkowski agrees:

“Kim said that to me. You know, when Lena Dunham takes her clothes off, she gets flack, but it’s also considered brave; when Justin Bieber takes his shirt off, he’s a grown-up. But when a woman who is sexual takes off her top, it plays into something.”

This actually gets right to the heart of the matter, though both try to backtrack — it makes very clear that Ratajkowski believes women’s sexuality exists for the male gaze, whether or not she is able to understand that. Dunham’s nudity is criticized, often, by many people, but the reason it is not viewed in the same way as Ratajkowski’s or Kim Kardashian’s is because the nudity Dunham chooses to display on *Girls* is [not a sexualized one](#), but a kind of intentionally ugly one — at very least a neutral one: a naked body that happens to be doing things like eating cake on the toilet, as opposed to a body that exists purely as a decorative object. Despite the conventionally attractive bodies of both Ratajkowski and Kardashian, they could choose a kind of nudity (if they must at all — it must be noted that women “choose” nudity much more often than men do, in the media) that was not objectifying, but do not. They could also, of course, be sexual and love their bodies without posting objectifying imagery of themselves on Instagram, looking flawless...

Whether or not people want to believe it, Lena Dunham’s body is no less objectifiable than Ratajkowski, although the latter is more likely to be encouraged

and commodified.

“There’s this idea that if a man enjoys a photograph of a nude woman or if he likes your short skirt, he’s taking something away from you,” Ratajkowski says. “It’s not right. Sex is normal. Desire is normal. Attention is normal, and that’s okay. That’s really what slut shaming is, right?”

And yes, of course sex and desire can be ok. But when we criticize objectification and sexualization, as feminists, we aren’t criticizing women for having bodies or sex or desires, we are criticizing exactly what Ratajkowski is espousing: the idea that having a female body is “sex.” It’s the idea that female bodies are to-be-looked-at and that this being looked at is what makes a woman “sexual.” Having breasts or being looked at by men has nothing to do with whether or not a woman enjoys sex or “owns her body.” And, in fact, that we equate female bodies with “sex” and see self-objectification as the only possible way a woman might “own her body” is part of the problem.

Women’s bodies don’t exist to be looked at — they don’t exist, even, for sex. They exist for us to live in. They are, in fact, functional things that belong (or should belong) to us — women — regardless of whether or not we put them on the internet.

Ratajkowski complains that when she posts nude (or near-nude) photos of herself online, she gets comments from men along the lines of, “Oh, sure, go ahead and reclaim your sexuality, I got my rocks off.” And I feel for her, in more ways than one. “Reclaiming” one’s sexuality in a culture so rife with sexual violence that we can’t seem to imagine sex without it is something that’s difficult even to imagine. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure whether it’s possible within a context of heterosexuality and patriarchy. But one thing we can do is to start thinking about women’s bodies — our own and others — as things that exist for ourselves, not for others. And we can start thinking about sexuality as something that we feel, not something that is projected at us from the outside, through the male gaze.

I mean, the thing is that, as much as I wish men wouldn’t leave those kinds of comments on Ratajkowski’s Instagram photos, the message conveyed is an accurate one. Posting sexualized photos of our naked breasts online really isn’t “for us,” otherwise we wouldn’t post them on the internet... It’s for others to look at and enjoy — if it weren’t, we’d probably leave ’em be, badly-lit, in [unflattering](#) or neutral poses, just as they are, rather than [perfected and presented and propped up](#), tanned and made pert with ice cubes, for the viewer, posed in the most unnatural ways, in order to be more easily gazed at and consumed.

There’s a reason interviews with men are not preceded by gigantic photographs of the interviewee nude atop a horse, in incredibly awkward positions. That Wolf and Ratajkowski can’t be bothered to consider and acknowledge why that is should provide some insight into the legitimacy of their analysis.

Impolite as it is to say, it can’t be denied that the only reason Ratajkowski is being asked to speak on such matters is because she defends the very status quo she imagines herself to be challenging.

