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**FEMINIST
PORN
BOOK**

THE POLITICS OF PRODUCING PLEASURE

Edited by

**TRISTAN TAORMINO, CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU,
CONSTANCE PENLEY, MIREILLE MILLER-YOUNG**

PRAISE FOR *THE FEMINIST PORN BOOK*

“In terms both jarring and harrowing, women’s bodies became the terrain on which the 2012 election was fought. That the choices, experiences, and consequences of women’s sexual lives became fodder for such poorly informed national ‘conversations’ is evidence of the pressing need for thoughtful, sex-positive scholarship which centers on women’s sexual agency. *The Feminist Porn Book* is just such a contribution, and I predict this volume is going to find its way onto the bedside tables of several generations of American women. It brings together academics, activists, and porn entrepreneurs who have a startling array of interactions with pornography as an experience, a business, and a field of inquiry. These essays are straightforward and informative in ways that are unfortunately rare in the multidecade feminist struggle over porn. It’s also fun and sometimes a bit naughty to read. The authors do not assume that the porn industry as it exists is the one essential and only possible incarnation of porn. Instead, they assume that when feminists engage, intervene in, produce, and study pornography, they can radically alter its formations and meanings. At the core of the book is the question: Can porn coexist with the principles of feminism? No matter how one ultimately adjudicates this question, *The Feminist Porn Book* leaves no doubt about the inherent value in the inquiry itself.”

—Melissa Harris-Perry, host of MSNBC’s *Melissa Harris-Perry*

“This thrilling anthology brings together scholars, producers, and fans of feminist pornography to define an emerging movement of gender and sexual visionaries, working at the radically inclusive and egalitarian edges of sexual representation. The authors explore an ever-widening range of body types, and a proliferating variety of images, sensations, and feelings. They examine the conditions of production as well as the politics of representation. They show us the new feminist porn as deep play—challenging, exciting, and important.”

—Lisa Duggan, professor of American studies and gender and sexuality studies, Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, New York University

“*The Feminist Porn Book* is a readable and smart must-have for any classroom dealing with sexual representations.”

—Chuck Kleinhans, co-editor of *JUMP CUT: a review of contemporary media*

“*The Feminist Porn Book* finally brings the voices of porn stars and directors into the room so they can speak for themselves. Part academic inquiry, part porn star tell-all, part comprehensive history of the growing influence of women in explicit cinema, *The Feminist Porn Book* is a brainy and fierce antidote to simplistic antiporn arguments, a love letter to feminists who seize the means of pornographic production and the academics who study them.”

—**Carol Queen, founding director of the Center for Sex and Culture, and author of *Real LiveNude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture***

“To have writings from so many of the most important creators in feminist porn in one anthology is wonderful. It captures the past, present, and future pioneering of this important film genre.”

—**Shine Louise Houston, director and CEO of Pink and White Productions**

“This impressive volume of essays shows that thirty years after the feminist sex wars first erupted, porn is still a hot topic for the women’s movement, and for the scholarly study of gender and sexuality. *The Feminist Porn Book* brings together a potent mix of perspectives from academics, activists, and sex industry workers, while addressing dis/ability, transness, and race/ethnicity.”

—**Susan Stryker, director of the Institute for LGBT Studies, University of Arizona**

“Eloquent, smart, passionate, and engaging—each page of *The Feminist Porn Book* offers a timely reminder of the continued importance of feminist interventions into the politics and production of pornography.”

—**Carol Stabile, director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon**

“In this breakthrough collection, scholars, artists, and producers from across a spectrum of identities serve up profound new insights on making, consuming, and studying porn. This book advances my understanding of how porn works, when it doesn’t, and why it matters. The short essay format makes this book ideal for teaching, but it’s essential reading for anyone interested in sexual politics or contemporary culture.”

—**Richard Fung, video artist and professor, Ontario College of Art and Design**

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**TRISTAN TAORMINO, CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU,
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Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure



**CONSTANCE PENLEY, CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU,
MIREILLE MILLER-YOUNG, and TRISTAN TAORMINO**

The *Feminist Porn Book* is the first collection to bring together writings by feminist porn producers and feminist porn scholars to engage, challenge, and re-imagine pornography. As collaborating editors of this volume, we are three porn professors and one porn director who have had an energetic dialogue about feminist politics and pornography for years. In their criticism, feminist opponents of porn cast pornography as a monolithic medium and industry and make sweeping generalizations about its production, its workers, its consumers, and its effects on society. These antiporn feminists respond to feminist pornographers and feminist porn professors in several ways. They accuse us of deceiving ourselves and others about the nature of pornography; they claim we fail to look critically at any porn and hold up all porn as empowering. More typically, they simply dismiss out of hand our ability or authority to make it or study it. But *The Feminist Porn Book* offers arguments, facts, and histories that cannot be summarily rejected, by providing on-the-ground and well-researched accounts of the politics of producing pleasure. Our agenda is twofold: to explore the emergence and significance of a thriving feminist porn movement, and to gather some of the best new feminist scholarship on pornography. By putting our voices into conversation, this book sparks new thinking about the richness and complexity of porn as a genre and an industry in a way that helps us to appreciate the work that feminists in the porn industry are doing, both in the mainstream and on its countercultural edges.

So to begin, we offer a broad definition of feminist porn, which will be fleshed out, debated, and examined in the pieces that follow. As both an established and emerging genre of pornography, feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure at their most confounding and difficult, including pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homo-

normativity. It seeks to unsettle conventional definitions of sex, and expand the language of sex as an erotic activity, an expression of identity, a power exchange, a cultural commodity, and even a new politics.

Feminist porn creates alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and discourses. It evolved out of and incorporates elements from the genres of “porn for women,” “couples porn,” and lesbian porn as well as feminist photography, performance art, and experimental filmmaking. It does not assume a singular female viewer, but acknowledges multiple female (and other) viewers with many different preferences. Feminist porn makers emphasize the importance of their labor practices in production and their treatment of performers/sex workers; in contrast to norms in the mainstream sectors of the adult entertainment industry, they strive to create a fair, safe, ethical, consensual work environment and often create imagery through collaboration with their subjects. Ultimately, feminist porn considers sexual representation—and its production—a site for resistance, intervention, and change.

The concept of feminist porn is rooted in the 1980s—the height of the feminist porn wars in the United States. The porn wars (also known as the sex wars) emerged out of a debate between feminists about the role of sexualized representation in society and grew into a full-scale divide that has lasted over three decades. In the heyday of the women’s movement in the United States, a broad-based, grassroots activist struggle over the proliferation of misogynistic and violent representations in corporate media was superseded by an effort focused specifically on legally banning the most explicit, and seemingly most sexist, media: pornography. Employing Robin Morgan’s slogan, “Porn is the theory, rape is the practice,” antipornography feminists argued that pornography amounted to the commodification of rape. As a group called Women Against Pornography (WAP) began to organize in earnest to ban obscenity across the nation, other feminists, such as Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter, Kate Ellis, and Carol Vance became vocal critics of what they viewed as WAP’s ill-conceived collusion with a sexually conservative Reagan administration and Christian Right, and their warping of feminist activism into a moral hygiene or public decency movement. Regarding antiporn feminism as a huge setback for the feminist struggle to empower women and sexual minorities, an energetic community of sex worker and sex-radical activists joined anticensorship and sex-positive feminists to build the foundation for the feminist porn movement.¹

The years that led up to the feminist porn wars are often referred to as the “golden age of porn,” a period from the early 1970s to the early 1980s,

marked by large budget, high-production-value feature films that were theatrically released. A group of female porn performers who worked during the golden age—including Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Candida Royalle, Gloria Leonard, and Veronica Hart—formed a support group (the first of its kind) called Club 90 in New York City. In 1984, the feminist arts collective Carnival Knowledge asked Club 90 to participate in a festival called *The Second Coming*, and explore the question, “Is there a feminist pornography?”² It is one of the first documented times when feminists publicly posed and examined this critical query.

That same year, Club 90 member Candida Royalle founded *Femme Productions* to create a new genre: porn from a woman’s point of view.³ Her films focused on storylines, high production values, female pleasure, and romance. In San Francisco, publishers Myrna Elana and Deborah Sundahl, along with Nan Kinney and Susie Bright, co-founded *On Our Backs*, the first porn magazine by and for lesbians. A year later, Kinney and Sundahl started *Fatale Video* to produce and distribute lesbian porn movies that expanded the mission that *On Our Backs* began.⁴ In the mainstream adult industry, performer and registered nurse Nina Hartley began producing and starring in a line of sex education videos for Adam and Eve, with her first two titles released in 1984. A parallel movement began to emerge throughout Europe in the 1980s and 90s.⁵

By the 1990s, Royalle and Hartley’s success had made an impact on the mainstream adult industry. Major studios, including Vivid, VCA, and Wicked, began producing their own lines of couples porn that reflected Royalle’s vision and generally followed a formula of softer, gentler, more romantic porn with storylines and high production values. The growth of the “couples porn” genre signified a shift in the industry: female desire and viewership were finally acknowledged, if narrowly defined. This provided more selection for female viewers and more opportunities for women to direct mainstream heterosexual films, including Veronica Hart and Kelly Holland (a.k.a. Toni English). Independent, lesbian-produced lesbian porn grew at a slower pace, but *Fatale Video* (which continued to produce new films until the mid-1990s) finally had some company in its micro-genre with work by Annie Sprinkle, Maria Beatty, and Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano. Sprinkle also made the first porn film to feature a trans man, and Christopher Lee followed with a film starring an entire cast of trans men.⁶

In the early 2000s, feminist porn began to take hold in the United States with the emergence of filmmakers who specifically identified themselves and/or their work as feminist including Buck Angel, Dana Dane, Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble, Madison Young, and

Tristan Taormino. Simultaneously, feminist filmmakers in Europe began to gain notoriety for their porn and sexually explicit independent films, including Erika Lust in Spain; Anna Span and Petra Joy in the UK; Emilie Jouvét, Virginie Despentes, and Taiwan-born Shu Lea Cheang in France; and Mia Engberg, who created a compilation of feminist porn shorts that was famously funded by the Swedish government.

The modern feminist porn movement gained tremendous ground in 2006 with the creation of The Feminist Porn Awards (FPAs). Chanelle Gallant and other staffers at sex-positive sex toy shop Good for Her in Toronto created the awards, which were open to films that met one or more of the following criteria:

(1) A woman had a hand in the production, writing, direction, etc. of the work; (2) It depicts genuine female pleasure; and/or (3) It expands the boundaries of sexual representation on film and challenges stereotypes that are often found in mainstream porn. And of course, it has to be hot! Overall, Feminist Porn Award winners tend to show movies that consider a female viewer from start to finish. This means that you are more likely to see active desire and consent, real orgasms, and women taking control of their own fantasies (even when that fantasy is to hand over that control).⁷

These criteria simultaneously assumed and announced a viewership, an authorship, an industry, and a collective consciousness. Embedded in the description is a female viewer and what she likely wants to see—active desire, consent, real orgasms, power, and agency—and doesn't want to see: passivity, stereotypes, coercion, or fake orgasms. The language is broad enough so as not to be prescriptive, yet it places value on agency and authenticity, with a parenthetical nod to the possibility that not every woman's fantasy is to be "in control." While the guidelines notably focus on a woman's involvement in production, honored filmmakers run the gamut from self-identified feminist pornographers to independent female directors to mainstream porn producers; the broad criteria achieve a certain level of inclusiveness and acknowledge that a range of work can be read by audiences, critics, and academics as feminist. The FPA ceremony attracts and honors filmmakers from around the world, and each year since its inception, every aspect of the event has grown, from the number of films submitted to the number of attendees. The FPAs have raised awareness about feminist porn among a wider audience and helped coalesce a community of filmmakers, performers, and fans; they highlight an industry within an industry, and, in the process, nurture this growing movement. In 2009, Dr. Laura Méritt (Berlin) cre-

ated the PorYes campaign and the European Feminist Porn Award modeled on the FPAs. Because the movement has had the most momentum in Europe and North America, this volume concentrates on the scholarship and films of Western nations. We acknowledge this limitation: for feminist porn to be a global project, more would need to be done to include non-Western scholars and pornographers in the conversation.

The work we do now, as scholars and producers, could not exist without early examinations of the history and context of pornography, including *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship* by FACT, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force. Linda Williams's groundbreaking 1989 *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* opened the door for feminist scholars to productively examine pornography as film and popular culture, as a genre and industry, textually, historically, and sociologically. Laura Kipnis's 1996 *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* made the strongest possible case that "the differences between pornography and other forms of culture are less meaningful than their similarities."⁸ Jane Juffer's 1996 *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* urged us to pay close attention not just to the hardcore porn typically consumed by men but to the uses of pornography in the daily lives of ordinary women. Since 1974 the film magazine *Jump Cut* has published more original scholarship on porn from a pro-sex, anticensorship perspective than any other media journal and by leading figures in the field, including Chuck Kleinhans, Linda Williams, Laura Kipnis, Richard Dyer, Thomas Waugh, Eithne Johnson, Eric Schaefer, Peter Lehman, Robert Eberwein, and Joanna Russ. More recently, Drucilla Cornell's *Feminism and Pornography*, Linda Williams's *Porn Studies*, and Pamela Church Gibson's *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power* cemented the value of porn scholarship.⁹ *The Feminist Porn Book* seeks to further that scholarship by adding a significant, valuable component: feminists *creating* pornography.

In this book, we identify a forty-year-long movement of thinkers, viewers, and makers, grounded in their desire to use pornography to explore new sexualities in representation. The work we have collected here defies other feminist conceptions of sexuality on screen as forever marked by a threat. That threat is the specter of violence against women, which is the primary way that pornography has come to be seen. Claiming that explicit sexual representations are nothing but gender oppression means that pornography's portrayal of explicit sex acts is a form of absolute discipline and subjugation for women. Within this frame, women who watch, study, or work in pornography bear the mark of

false consciousness—as if they dabble in fire while ignoring the risk of burning.

The overwhelming popularity of women's erotic literature, illustrated by the recent worldwide best seller, *Fifty Shades of Grey* by EL James, and the flourishing women's fan fiction community from which it emerged, proves that there is great demand among women for explicit sexual representations. Millions of female readers embraced the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy—which follows a young woman who becomes the submissive sexual partner to a dominant man—not for its depiction of oppression, but for its exploration of erotic freedom. Women-authored erotica and pornography speaks to fantasies women actually have, fantasies that are located in a world where women must negotiate power constantly, including in their imaginations and desires. As with the criteria for winning a Feminist Porn Award, these books and the feminist porn movement show that “women are taking control of their own fantasies (even when that fantasy is to hand over control).”

With the emergence of new technologies that allow more people than ever to both create and consume pornography, the moral panic-driven fears of porn are ratcheted up once again. Society's dread of women who own their desire, and use it in ways that confound expectations of proper female sexuality, persists. As Gayle Rubin shows, “Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value.”¹⁰ Rubin maps this system as one where “the charmed circle” is perpetually threatened by the “outer limits” or those who fall out of the bounds of the acceptable. On the bottom of this hierarchy are sexual acts and identities outside heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and reproduction. She argues that this hierarchy exists so as to justify the privileging of normative and constricted sexualities and the denigration and punishment of the “sexual rabble.”¹¹ *The Feminist Porn Book* showcases precisely these punishable sex acts and identities that are outside of the charmed circle and proudly sides with the sexual rabble. Spotlighting the numerous ways people confront the power of sexuality, this book paves the way for exploring the varieties of what were previously dismissed as perversities. At the same time, feminist porn can also expose what passes for “normal” sexuality at the center of that charmed circle.

One of the unfortunate results of the porn wars was the fixing of an antiporn camp versus a sex-positive/pro-porn camp. On one side, a capital P “Pornography” was a visual embodiment of the patriarchy and violence against women. On the other, Porn was defended as “speech,” or as a form that should not be foreclosed because it might some day be transformed into a vehicle for women's erotic expression. The nuances

and complexities of actual lowercase “pornographies” were lost in the middle. For example, sex-positive thinking does not always accommodate the ways in which women are constrained by sexuality. But the problem with antipornography’s assumption that sex is inherently oppressive to women—that women are debased when they have sex on camera—ignores and represses the sexuality of women. Hence, for us, sex-positive feminist porn does not mean that sex is always a ribbon-tied box of happiness and joy. Instead, feminist porn captures the struggle to define, understand, and locate one’s sexuality. It recognizes the importance of deferring judgment about the significance of sex in intimate and social relations, and of not presuming what sex means for specific people. Feminist porn explores sexual ideas and acts that may be fraught, confounding, and deeply disturbing to some, and liberating and empowering to others. What we see at work here are competing definitions of sexuality that expose the power of sexuality in all of its unruliness.

Because feminist porn acknowledges that identities are socially situated and that sexuality has the power to discipline, punish, and subjugate, that unruliness may involve producing images that seem oppressive, degrading, or violent. Feminist porn does not shy away from the darker shades of women’s fantasies. It creates a space for realizing the contradictory ways in which our fantasies do not always line up with our politics or ideas of who we think we are. As Tom Waugh argues, participation in pornography, in his case as spectator, can be a “process of social identity formation.”¹² Indeed, social identities and ideas are formed in the act of viewing porn, but also in making and writing about it.

Strongly influenced by other social movements in the realm of sexuality, like the sex-positive, LGBT rights, and sex workers’ rights movements, feminist porn aims to build community, to expand liberal views on gender and sexuality, and to educate and empower performers and audiences. It favors fair, ethical working conditions for sex workers and the inclusion of underrepresented identities and practices. Feminist porn vigorously challenges the hegemonic depictions of gender, sex roles, and the pleasure and power of mainstream porn. It also challenges the anti-porn feminist interpretive framework for pornography as bankrupt of progressive sexual politics. As a budding movement, it promotes aesthetic and ethical practices that intervene in dominant sexual representation and mobilize a collective vision for change. This erotic activism, while in no way homogeneous or consistent, works within and against the marketplace to imagine new ways to envision gender and sexuality in our culture.

But feminist porn is not only an emergent social movement and an

alternative cultural production: it is a genre of media made for profit. Part of a multibillion dollar business in adult entertainment media, feminist porn is an industry within an industry. Some feminist porn is produced independently, often created and marketed by and for underrepresented minorities like lesbians, transgender folks, and people of color. But feminist porn is also produced within the mainstream adult industry by feminists whose work is funded and distributed by large companies such as Vivid Entertainment, Adam and Eve, and Evil Angel Productions. As outliers or insiders (or both) to the mainstream industry, feminists have adapted different strategies for subverting dominant pornographic norms and tropes. Some reject nearly all elements of a typical adult film, from structure to aesthetics, while others tweak the standard formula (from “foreplay” to “cum shot”) to reposition and prioritize female sexual agency. Although feminist porn makers define their work as distinct from mainstream porn, it is nonetheless viewed by a range of people, including people who identify as feminist and specifically seek it out, as well as other viewers who don’t. Feminist porn is gaining momentum and visibility as a market and a movement. This movement is made up of performers turned directors, independent queer producers, politicized sex workers, porn geeks and bloggers, and radical sex educators. These are the voices found here. This is the perfect time for *The Feminist Porn Book*.

In this book, we place academics alongside and in conversation with sex industry workers to bridge the divide between rigorous research and critique, and real world challenges and interventions. In Jill Nagle’s seminal work *Whores and Other Feminists*, she announced, “This time . . . sex worker feminists speak not as guests, nor as disgruntled exiles, *but as insiders to feminism*.”¹³ As in Nagle’s collection, here those working in the porn industry speak for themselves, and their narratives illuminate their complicated experiences, contradict one another, and expose the damaging one-dimensional rhetoric of the antiporn feminist resurgence. Like feminist porn itself, the diverse voices in this collection challenge entrenched, divisive dichotomies of academic and popular, scholar and sex worker, pornographer and feminist.

In the first section of the book, Making Porn, Debating Porn, feminist porn pioneers Betty Dodson, Candida Royalle, and Susie Bright give a grounded history of feminist porn as it emerged in the 1980s in response to the limiting sexual imagination of both mainstream porn and anti-porn feminism. Providing a window into the generative and deeply contested period of the sex wars, these feminist pornographers highlight the stakes and energies surrounding the birth of feminist porn activism in

the face of an antiporn feminism that ignored, misunderstood, or vilified them and their efforts. Bright's account of watching her first porn film, sitting among suspicious men in a dark adult theater, sets the stage for how the invention of the VHS player shifted women's consumption of porn and dramatically changed the marketplace.

In the last decade, a new war on porn has been resurrected and redefined by Gail Dines, Sheila Jeffries, Karen Boyle, Pamela Paul, Robert Jensen, and others. Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith show how this resurgent antiporn movement resists theory and evidence, and tendentially reframes the production and consumption of porn as a mode of sex trafficking, a form of addiction, or a public health problem of epidemic proportions. Attwood and Smith's work powerfully exposes how feminist porn remains challenged and often censored in contemporary popular discourse. Lynn Comella focuses on the consequences of pornography going public. She examines one of the most significant elements of the emergence of feminist porn: the growth of sex-positive, women-owned-and-run sex shops and a grassroots sex education movement that create space for women to produce, find, and consume new kinds of pornography.

Watching and Being Watched examines how desire and agency inform pornographic performance, representation, and spectatorship. Sinnamon Love and Mireille Miller-Young explore the complex position of African American women as they watch, critique, and create representations of black women's sexuality. Dylan Ryan and Jane Ward take up the concept of authenticity in porn: what it means, how it's read, and why it is (or is not) crucial to feminist porn performance and spectatorship. Ingrid Ryberg looks at how public screenings of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn can create spaces for sexual empowerment. Tobi Hill-Meyer complicates Ryberg's analysis by documenting who, until very recently, was left out of these spaces: trans women. Keiko Lane echoes Ryberg's argument of the radical potential of queer and feminist porn and offers it as a tool for understanding and expressing desire among marginalized communities.

The intersection of feminist porn as pedagogy and feminist pedagogies of porn is highlighted in *Doing It In School*. As porn scholars, Constance Penley and Ariane Cruz grapple with teaching and studying porn from two very different perspectives. Kevin Heffernan offers a history of sex instruction in film and contrasts it with work from Nina Hartley and Tristan Taormino in educational porn movies. Hartley discusses how she has used porn to teach throughout her twenty-five-plus years in the industry, and Taormino outlines her practice as a feminist pornographer

offering organic, fair-trade porn that takes into account the labor of its workers. Performer Danny Wylde documents his personal experiences with power, consent, and exploitation against a backdrop of antiporn rhetoric. Lorelei Lee offers a powerful manifesto that demands we all become better students in order to achieve a more nuanced, discerning, and thoughtful discourse about porn and sex.

Now *Playing*: *Feminist Porn* takes up questions of hypercorporeality, genderqueerness, transfemininity, feminized masculinity, transgressive racial performance, and disability. Jiz Lee discusses how they (Lee's favored gender-neutral pronoun) use their transgressive female body and genderqueer identity to defy categories. April Flores describes herself as "a fat Latina with pale skin, tattoos, and fire engine red hair," and gives her unique take on being (and not being) a Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) performer. Bobby Noble explores the role of trans men and the interrogation of masculinities in feminist porn, while renowned trans male performer Buck Angel explodes sex/gender dichotomies by embodying his identity of a man with a vagina. Also concerned with the complex representation and performance of manhood in feminist pornography, Celine Parreñas Shimizu asks how race shapes the work of straight Asian male performer Keni Styles. Loree Erickson, a feminist pornographer and PhD candidate, represents not only a convergence of scholarship and sex work, but one of the most overlooked subjects in pornography and one de-eroticized in society: "queer femmegimp." Emerging to speak from group identities previously missing or misnamed, the pieces in this section are by people who show the beauty of their desires, give shape to their realities, reject and reclaim attributions made by others, and describe how they create sexual worlds that denounce inequality.

Throughout the book, we explore the multiple definitions of feminist porn, but we refuse to fix its boundaries. Feminist porn is a genre and a political vision. And like other genres of film and media, feminist porn shares common themes, aesthetics, and goals even though its parameters are not clearly demarcated. Because it is born out of a feminism that is not one thing but a living, breathing, moving creation, it is necessarily contested—an argument, a polemic, and a debate. Because it is both genre and practice, we must engage it as both: by reading and analyzing its cultural texts and examining the ideals, intentions, and experiences of its producers. In doing so, we offer an alternative to unsubstantiated oversimplifications and patronizing rhetoric. We acknowledge the complexities of watching, creating, and analyzing pornographies. And we believe in the radical potential of feminist porn to transform sexual representation and the way we live our sexualities.

Notes

1. Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 139. On the porn wars or sex wars, see Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Antipornography Movement, 1976–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Carole Vance, ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, eds., *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography and Power* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); and the documentary film by Harriet Koskoff, *Patently Offensive: Porn Under Siege* (1991).

2. Annie Sprinkle, *Post-Porn Modernist: My 25 Years as a Multimedia Whore* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 149–51.

3. Annette Fuentes and Margaret Schrage, "Deep Inside Porn Stars," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 32 (1987): 41–43, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC32folder/PornWomenInt.html>.

4. Susie Bright, *Big Sex, Little Death: A Memoir* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011) and Susie Bright, "A History Of *On Our Backs*: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian, The Original: 1984–1990," http://susiebright.blogs.com/History_of_OOB.pdf. See also, "About Fatale Media," accessed September 5, 2011, <http://www.fatalemedia.com/about.html>.

5. Feminists in Europe who used sexually explicit photography and film to explore themes like female pleasure, S/M, bondage, gender roles, and queer desire include Monika Treut (Germany), Cleo Uebelmann (Switzerland), Krista Beinstein (Germany and Austria), and Della Grace (England). In 1998, Danish film production company Zentropa wrote the Puzzy Power Manifesto that outlined its guidelines for a new line of porn for women, which echoed Royalle's vision: their films included plot-driven narratives that depicted foreplay and emotional connection, women's pleasure and desire, and male and female bodies beyond just their genitals. See Laura Merrit, "PorYes! The European Feminist Porn Movement," [unpublished manuscript] and Zentropa, "The Manifesto," accessed January 29, 2012, <http://www.puzzypower.dk/UK/index.php/om-os/manifest>.

6. In addition, we must acknowledge the early work of Sachi Hamano, the first woman to direct "pink films" (Japanese softcore porn). Hamano directed more than three hundred in the 1980s and 90s in order to portray women's sexual power and agency, and challenge the representation of women as sex objects only present to fulfill men's fantasies. See Virginie Sélavy, "Interview with Sachi Hamano," December 1, 2009, <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2009/12/01/interview-with-sachi-hamano/>.

7. Feminist Porn Awards, accessed September 5, 2011, http://goodforher.com/feminist_porn_awards.

8. Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), viii.

9. See Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: LongRiver Books, [1986] 1992); Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: NYU Press, 1998); *Jump Cut: A Review*

of *Contemporary Media*, eds. Julia Lesage, Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess (<http://www.ejumpcut.org>); Drucilla Cornell, ed., *Feminism and Pornography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Pamela Church Gibson, ed., *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power* (London: British Film Institute, 2004).

10. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 279.

11. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 280.

12. Tom Waugh, "Homoerotic Representation in the Stag Film 1920–1940: Imagining An Audience," *Wide Angle* 14, no. 2 (1992): 4.

13. Jill Nagle, ed., *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 3. Emphasis in original text.

Porn Wars



BETTY DODSON

Artist, author, and sexologist **Betty Dodson** has been one of the principal advocates for women's sexual pleasure and health for over three decades. After her first one-woman show of erotic art in 1968, Dodson produced and presented the first feminist slide show of vulvas at the 1973 NOW Sexuality Conference in New York City where she introduced the electric vibrator as a pleasure device. For twenty-five years, she ran Bodysex Workshops, teaching women about their bodies and orgasms. Her first book, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Selflove*, became a feminist classic. *Sex for One* sold over a million copies. Betty and her young partner Carlin Ross continue to provide sex education at dodsonandross.com. This piece is excerpted from Dodson's memoir, *My Romantic Love Wars: A Sexual Memoir*.

When it comes to creating or watching sexual material, women are still debating what is acceptable to make, view, or enjoy. The porn wars rage on while most guys secretly beat off to whatever turns them on. Meanwhile, far too many feminists want to control or censor porn. Most people will agree that sex is a very personal matter, but now that sexual imagery has become prevalent with Internet porn available on our computers 24/7, I'd say—like it or not—porn is here to stay.

The fact that pornography is a multibillion-dollar industry and the engine that first drove the Internet proves that most people want to see images of sex whether they admit it openly or not. After women's sexual liberation got underway in the sixties and seventies, women turned against each other to debate whether an image was erotic or pornographic. Unfortunately this endless and senseless debate continues today.

My first attempt at drawing sex was a real eye opener. In 1968, I had my first one-woman show of erotic art titled *The Love Picture Exhibition*. The experience raised my awareness of the many people who enjoyed seeing beautiful drawings of couples having intercourse and oral sex.

With my second show—of masturbating nudes—all hell broke loose. The show not only ended my gallery affiliation, but it was then that I became aware of how ignorant most Americans were about human sexuality. My six-foot drawing of a masturbating woman holding an electric vibrator next to her clitoris—an erect one at that—might have been the first public appearance of the clitoris in recent history. It was 1970—the year I became a feminist activist determined to liberate masturbation.

In 1971, I had my first encounter with censorship when *Evergreen* magazine published images of my erotic art. A Connecticut district attorney threatened to issue an injunction if the magazine was not removed from the local public library. My friend and former lover Grant Taylor drove us to Connecticut to meet with the DA. His main objection was my painting of an all-women orgy. He pounded his fist on the page spewing out the words, “Lesbianism is a clear sign of perversion!”

When the meeting ended, the press descended on me. I don’t recall what I said except that sex was nice and censorship was dirty and that kids were never upset by my art, but their parents often were. A few people complimented me on my words and art. One woman said she found my art “disgusting and pornographic,” but that I had a right to show it. Her comment was the most upsetting. Driving home, I remember asking Grant how anyone could call my beautifully drawn nudes disgusting: “Why can’t people distinguish between art that’s erotic and art that’s pornographic?”

“Betty, it’s all art,” he said. “Beauty or pornography will always be in the eyes of the beholder.” He went on to warn me against making the mistake of trying to define either one. It was an intellectual trap that led to endless debates with no agreements in sight. After thinking about it, I knew he was right! That night I decided to forget about defining erotic art as being superior to pornographic images. Instead, I embraced the label “pornographer.” All at once, I felt exhilarated by the thought that I could become America’s first feminist pornographer.

The next day, I got out my dictionary and found the word pornography originated from the Greek *pornographos*: the writings of prostitutes. If society treated sex with any dignity or respect, both pornographers and prostitutes would have status, which they obviously had at one time. The sexual women of antiquity were the artists and writers of sexual love. Since organized religions have made all forms of sexual pleasure evil, no modern equivalent exists today. As a result, knowledge of the esteemed courtesans was lost, buried in our collective unconscious, suppressed by the authoritarian organized religions that consistently excluded women.

The idea of reclaiming women’s sexual power by creating pornogra-

phy was a heady concept. Feminists could restore historical perspectives of the ancient temple priestesses of Egypt, the sacred prostitutes, the Amazons of Lesbos, and the royal courtesans of the Sumerian palaces. Sexual love was probably what people longed for, so I gave myself permission to break the next thousand rules of social intimidation aimed at controlling women's sexual behavior. I did just that and continue to do so to this day. In order for women to progress, we must question all authority, be willing to challenge any rule aimed at controlling our sexual behavior, and avoid doing business as usual, thereby maintaining the status quo.

After I fully enjoyed the United States' brief outbreak of sexual freedoms that began at the end of the 1960s, my glorious group sex parties allowed me to realize how many women were faking orgasms. So in 1971, I designed the Bodysex Workshops to teach women about sex through the practice of masturbation. It was sexual consciousness-raising at its best as we went around the circle with each woman answering my question: "How do you feel about your body and your orgasm?" We also eliminated genital shame by looking at our own vulvas and each other's. Finally, we learned to harness the power of the electric vibrator with the latest techniques for self-stimulation during our all-women masturbation circles.

The Bodysex Workshops continued over the next twenty-five years. They took a lot out of me; I ended up sacrificing my hip joints to women's sexual liberation! These groups also offered unique fieldwork in female masturbation, a subject rarely researched in academia, and I ended up with a PhD in sexology.

In 1982 at the age of fifty-three, I joined a support group of lesbian and bisexual women who were into consensual S/M. Perhaps I had avoided this small subculture because I suspected there was something unhealthy about mixing pain with pleasure. Instead of finding sick, confused women, I discovered a group of feminists who were enjoying the most politically incorrect sex imaginable. One of our first big mistakes as feminists was to establish politically correct sex, defined as the ideal of love between equals with both partners remaining monogamous.

For heterosexual women, politically correct sex put us in the age old bind of trying to change men by getting them to shape up and settle down. That meant men had to also practice monogamy—a project that has consistently failed for centuries. Most men are hardwired to have multiple sex partners while women who want children need a more lasting and secure relationship in order to raise a family. Those of us who remained single also wanted multiple sex partners. Our efforts to expand

the idea of feminist sex were censored by mainstream feminists and the media at every turn.

The night of my first S/M meeting, I entered the small apartment and as I looked around the room, I didn't see one familiar face among these younger women. My internal dialogue was like a broken record: "They're probably all lesbian separatists and the minute they find out I'm bisexual, they won't let me join." I'd been discriminated against so many times in the past that the chip on my shoulder weighed heavily. As I sat there wallowing in my anticipated rejection, I visually fell into lust with every woman there. What a marvelous variety from stone butch to lipstick lesbians. When the meeting began, each woman introduced herself, then stated whether she was dominant or submissive, and said a few words about how she liked to play. The closer they got to me, the faster the butterflies in my belly fluttered. When all eyes were on me, I defensively said, "I'm a bisexual lesbian who's into self-inflicted pleasure!"

Several women smiled. One asked how I inflicted my pleasure, and when I said it was with an electric vibrator, the room broke up laughing. A group of lesbian and bisexual feminists who were willing to explore kinky sex was my fondest dream come true and within no time, I was right at home.

Gradually I began to understand that all forms of sex were an exchange of power, whether it was conscious or unconscious. My focus had been on the pleasure in sex, not the power. The basic principle of S/M was that all sexual activity between one or more adults had to be consensual and required a verbal negotiation, followed by an agreement between the players. All my years of romantic sex, when we tried to read each other's minds, were basically nonconsensual sex. Romantic love is one of the most damaging concepts on the planet for women—little girls raised on Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* are taught to wait for a prince to awaken them.

By the time I was in my midthirties and sport fucking, I learned to take control and be a top as a means of getting what I wanted. But none of these sexual activities were ever discussed or agreed upon openly. As I looked at sexuality in terms of this power dynamic, it felt like I was waking from a deep sleep.

That spring, Dorothy, the founding mother of our group, invited me to join her at a conference organized by Women Against Pornography (WAP). Her commitment to feminism was contagious and she was aware of all the current happenings in the movement. By then I had dropped out of feminism so I was learning a lot from Dorothy, a thirty-year-old radical lesbian who had been trashed by other feminists because of her

S/M sexual preferences. As a post-menopausal hedonist in my fifties, I looked forward to my first public feminist forum dressed as a leather dyke.

The two of us trooped into the WAP conference arm in arm, wearing boots and jeans with large silver studded belts under our black leather jackets—high-visibility leather dykes sitting in the front row just to the left of the podium. The women glared at us, signaling that we were out of place, while we wore our political incorrectness like a badge of honor.

At the time, I had difficulty taking this group seriously. After feminists had fought against censoring information about birth control, abortion, sexuality, and lesbianism, the idea that there was now a group that wanted to censor pornography seemed absurd. Surely WAP was only a small percentage of feminists, but Dorothy said they were gaining strength and growing in numbers. *Ms.* magazine had contributed money to WAP, and under pressure from members, NOW (National Organization for Women) had approved a resolution that condemned pornography without defining it. Several local NOW chapters actively supported WAP. Censorship was coiled like a rattlesnake ready to strike at our freedom and poison people's enjoyment of masturbating while looking at pictures of sex. Unbelievable!

The large meeting room at NYU was packed with women only—nearly a thousand had assembled. A red cloth banner with big black letters stretched across the back of the stage: WOMEN AGAINST PORNOGRAPHY. That had to cost a pretty penny. There was also a first-rate sound system, along with expensive printed flyers—all done very professionally. This was no makeshift feminist conference where we had mimeographed handouts. Dorothy leaned in close and asked, "When have you ever seen a conference dealing with women's issues that had this kind of money behind it?" We both agreed that WAP most likely had been secretly funded by the CIA, the Christian Right, or both. The Good Old Boys were setting us up again—divide and conquer!

Drifting into a reverie, I thought about the 1973 NOW Sexuality Conference. I remembered how brave we'd been, questioning sex roles and sexual taboos, exploring female sexual pleasure, and daring to create better sex lives for women with information and education. We'd been so sex positive and filled with excitement that we would change the world. How, in just ten short years, could we have ended up against pornography, which put feminists in the same bed as Christians preaching the gospel?

The WAP conference featured many speakers. Each gave a brief, personal history, and nearly every one had a horror story of sexual abuse at

the hands of a father, brother, husband, lover, or boss. There were stories of rape, battered wives, child abuse, harassment, and forced prostitution. Dorothy was busy taking notes while I sat there stunned by the realization that I was in the midst of an orgy of suffering, angry women. Each speaker's words and tears were firing up the group into a unified rage. Emotionalism without intellect from victims without power was how lynch mobs and nationwide hate groups were formed—the basic strategy of fascism, I concluded with a shiver.

It saddened me to hear how these women had suffered, and I would never deny that their pain was real. For most of them, sex had truly been a misery or a violent trauma. No sane person was for rape or incest, but this one-dimensional attack on images of sex was totally unacceptable. Blaming pornography as the sole cause of women's sexual problems was ludicrous. Why weren't they going after big problems like war, poverty, organized religion, and sexual ignorance due to the total absence of decent sex education in our school system?

An attractive blonde in her midthirties stood at the mic. With her rage barely controlled, she described her childhood sexual abuse. Every Saturday when her mother pulled out of the driveway to do the grocery shopping, her father got out his "disgusting, filthy pictures" and forced her to perform an "unnatural act." She didn't say what it was, but the audience was surely fantasizing an adult penis penetrating an eleven-year-old girl. The whole room was emotionally whipped up into a rage with their own private images of child rape, while at the same time, reveling in the awfulness of it.

The speaker went on to blame the entire incident on pornography! There was no mention of society's denial of sexual expression, especially masturbation. Maybe the father was a devout Catholic who knew he'd go to hell if he took hold of his own penis. How about the nuclear family taking some of the blame with its restrictive sexual mores? But none of these other possibilities occurred to her. She was adamant that "dirty pictures" had been the sole cause of her incest.

The WAP meeting ended with an open mic session, and within moments, emotional chaos broke loose. Women were crying and screaming hysterically, so we got out fast. Once outside, we took a deep breath to release our own tension. We both felt drained. Although we disagreed with WAP, they had a right to their opinions even though they didn't respect our rights. We remained sexual outlaws.

The 1980s also ushered in AIDS, and the Reagan government was slow to respond to this looming crisis. How perfect: AIDS ended casual sex and sent the population back into committed relationships and

monogamy—the glue that binds. Child sexual abuse was rampant and getting national attention, while no one paid any attention to how poverty was really hurting our kids. Finally women were being heard, but it was only half the conversation. We were not getting ahead by avoiding central issues—and we certainly were not liberating our sexualities.

During this time, women showed up at my workshops and broke down in tears as they began to talk about being sexually abused. Each time, I would ask them to leave, with the explanation that my groups were about exploring pleasure, not sexual abuse. They needed to see a therapist and then come back for a Bodysex Workshop later on. Some women accused me of having a hard heart, but I simply stayed on mission of liberating women's independent orgasms so we could come back to life—actually and fully.

My Bodysex Workshops were well received, so I decided to film one. You just can't beat the moving image; it's an opportunity to give people images of what sex might be. The best way for us to learn is to find out what's going on with everyone else. My girlfriend and I used a home video camera, and it took me two years to edit it on two clunky tape decks. My films were automatically labeled porn, because if you see a pussy or a penis, it's porn. But you can't teach sex without getting explicit, so, again, I found myself embracing the role of pornographer.

Before the Internet, every time I said “masturbation,” it either sent folks into gales of laughter or provoked embarrassed looks as they quickly changed the subject. My articles for magazines were canceled and interviews for television ended up on the cutting room floor. The bottom line of sexual repression is the prohibition of childhood masturbation. This humble activity is the basis for all of human sexuality. The Internet was the first place in my long career that I was not censored.

My old lover Grant ran my first website. At the end, he was classified as legally blind, and held a magnifying glass, with his nose an inch from the screen. When I joined forces with law school grad and cyber geek Carlin Ross, we created a new website. I believe that once Grant met Carlin, he was able to leave his disintegrating body. He made it to his eighty-sixth birthday and died proud with his boots on, with the next upload for my website sitting on his hard drive. I miss him terribly to this day. We had the most passionate love/hate affair of the century.

Carlin and I offer free, accessible sex information, both visual and written, to women and men. We call the clips where we show sexual skills, “The New Porn.” Sex education must be entertaining, not academic, dry, boring, or stilted. I'm not afraid of the word porn. If people

are going to call my explicit sex education porn, then I say embrace the word. Be the new porn, be the porn you want to see. While it's true that a lot of pornography out there is shitty for the most part, it still works: it gets people hot. The biggest turn on for me is to have a fully orgasmic partner, not someone pretending or playing. We all know the real deal when it's happening—authentic orgasms are unmistakable. I'm a sex-positive feminist, liberating women one orgasm at a time.

Our site represents a new feminist sexual politics that's well beyond any victimhood of rape and sexual abuse. We represent orgasmic feminism—a new movement of women who have taken control of our sex lives, and who dare to design them in any way we choose whether we're straight, bi, lesbian, or a combination, and we can enjoy our bodies in any way we desire.

Recently, I love answering sex questions for free from all kinds of young, middle-aged, and older women, as well as boys and men. I'm learning about the concerns and sexual problems of Americans and people from around the world. Let me tell you: sexuality is in a lot of trouble. Young women today do not know what, when, where, or how to have an orgasm. Many of them have grown up without childhood masturbation, thanks to the growing influence of religion and the censorship of sexual information. Without access to proper sexual information, porn has been their primary form of sex education. The issue here is that the most readily available porn is basically entertainment for men. One young woman said she was sure she'd never had an orgasm because she'd never ejaculated. Unfortunately, the G-spot has become the new name for vaginal orgasms. It's unfortunate because a very small percentage of women squirt when they experience an orgasm. I wrote my first book to help those few women know that this response was natural. Now we have a nation of young women trying to learn how to ejaculate.

Well-meaning friends suggest that I should drop the word “feminist,” and perhaps the entire concept, because feminism is so “old hat.” Young women today have lost interest in feminism because they believe it's antisex and that all feminists are man haters. Let me tell you something, girlfriends. That's exactly what the powers-that-be want us to think and do. Feminism has become a dirty word, and I want to save it, to revive it. I want feminism to signify a woman who knows what she wants in bed and gets it. Guys will be saying, “I've got to find me a feminist to fuck!”

At eighty-two, I've decided to make a documentary based on the Bodysex Workshops. In a sense, I'm going back to the beginning, to document the heart of my work. The all-women's masturbation circle is

my sewing circle. “How do you feel about your body and your orgasm?” is a question still worth asking and the resulting conversation is one still worth having. We are there to listen to and honor each woman’s personal story. We celebrate our independent orgasms without a partner or with one.

This time around, it will be captured professionally with a film crew and better quality lighting and sound. I want to document this with the esteem it deserves, so I can leave the planet happy in the knowledge that this incredible workshop, designed by the early women who first attended, will be captured for all to see. It will be my most brilliant work of art, my Sistine Chapel. Now I have to have the courage to be an old Crone on film. I’m willing to set an example for seniors who are giving up on sex way too soon. After all, my ageing body can still see, hear, eat, drink, laugh, talk, walk, sing, dance, shit, masturbate, fuck, create, draw, write, and have orgasms!

In my heart, I believe that women and girls will not be self-motivated and self-possessed if they cannot give themselves orgasms. If they rely on someone else for sexual pleasure, they are potential victims of whatever society is pushing as “normal.” Masturbation is a meditation on self-love. It is essential. Sex-positive feminism is alive and well and we *will* change the world. It’s just going to take a bit longer than expected. Viva la Vulva!

The Birth of the Blue Movie Critic



SUSIE BRIGHT

Susie Bright's legacy in porn criticism and debate is detailed in her latest book, *Susie Bright's Erotic Screen: The Golden Hardcore & the Shimmering Dyke-Core*. She is the author of the national best sellers *Full Exposure* and *The Sexual State of the Union*, as well as her memoir, *Big Sex Little Death*. She is the host of Audible's *In Bed With Susie Bright*, the longest-running sexuality program in the history of broadcasting. Bright was co-founder and editor of *On Our Backs* magazine, and the first journalist to cover erotic cinema and the porn business in the mainstream press. A progenitor of the sex-positive movement, Bright taught the first university course on pornography, and brought lasting sexual influence to her role and writing in films like *Bound* and *The Celluloid Closet*, as well as by playing herself, "the famous feminist sex writer," on *Six Feet Under*.

I was hired by Jack Heidenry in 1986 to write for *Penthouse Forum*, a pocketbook-size sex journal that porn mogul Bob Guccione published during his heyday. I had no idea that Jack's plan was so experimental. All I knew was that I'd never been paid to write professionally before, though I'd worked tirelessly on newspapers and underground magazines since I was a teenager, including one that got me suspended for distributing birth control information in high school. My first "sex advice column" was written for a 1980s underground magazine dedicated to "entertainment for the adventurous lesbian." I was always the enthusiastic volunteer of the sexual liberation front.

But I'd never watched an X-rated movie.

I didn't tell Jack my secret. It was such an amazing opportunity that I wanted him to think I wrote for piles of money all the time and knew everything about erotic theater.

Unlike Guccione's flagship title with its pin-up girl centerfolds, *Forum* was full of sexy words instead of sexy pictures, and was read by men and women alike.

Heidenry found me because he admired my writing and editorship of a two-year-old, antiestablishment, lesbian sex magazine called *On Our Backs*. I was shocked he'd even heard of us. Our tiny posse in San Francisco didn't publish our manifesto with men in mind.

Jack asked me to write a monthly column, "The Erotic Screen," to review and report on the latest in erotic cinema. A year later, he added an advice column so I could respond to erotic film questions.

It must have been a red-letter day in 1986 for women's lib at the Guccione Empire—Heidenry hired me, Veronica Vera, and Annie Sprinkle as monthly contributors. Has any leading circulation magazine in New York ever again hired three talented women as contributing editors and paid them handsomely? I was blissfully out of the loop about how few women worked in these capacities.

I was twenty-eight years old. All those famous hardcore films like *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door* had come out when I was in Catholic grade school wearing saddle shoes and plaid skirts.

When I was a kid, I was curious about "X-rated" movies, of course—but by the time I was a teen, I was a radical, and I considered blue movies, the whole idea of them, to be pathetic. I thought the people who made or watched *those* films must be lonely, at best. They needed to take their clothes off and go have sex with everyone else at the nude beach. My actual life at the time would have made a good porno.

By the time the 1980s arrived, I was creating lesbian erotica every day with a talented band of art radicals at our all-dyke office above a Chinese take-out restaurant in the Castro. I worked at a day job in a closet-sized feminist sex toy shop, the original Good Vibrations founded by Joani Blank. It was the only place of its kind. Our great inventory disadvantage was that hardly anyone in the "erotic" world made anything of interest for women.

My vibrator shop colleagues and I talked about "someday" publishing a book of erotic short stories by women—it had never been done. I saw only a few customers per day, and in between talking about the miracle of the Magic Wand vibrator, we talked about how no one seemed to believe that women had erotic, aesthetic interests of their own.

At *On Our Backs*, we were inventing everything from scratch. How about mounting a lesbian strip show performed by real dyke whores and strippers who wanted to perform for their own kind? Done! How about making videos of real butches and femmes and punks, people who looked like us, out dykes with real faces, having sex like real women do? Let's do it!

It slowly dawned on us that there'd never been an erotic magazine

put together by women of any persuasion—straight, bi, or gay—nor had lesbians ever published a periodical, even non-erotic, so blatantly and visually out of the closet. Our names and faces were on the line.

My start at *Forum* was clumsy. I asked Jack, “You know I’m a lesbian feminist, right? I’m not going to change my mind about how I see things.”

But that wasn’t the half of it. I wasn’t a professional journalist, despite my political credentials. My first *Forum* review, to my eyes now, reads like a high school book report. Furthermore, I had no contacts in the business, no introductions. I had to buy a ticket like every other dirty old man and march into the Pussycat Theater for a theatrical viewing. I didn’t know what a VCR was—none of my friends watched videos at home.

Now I’m glad for my initial deprivation. I ended up seeing amazing 35 mm films on some of the biggest and most elegant screens in San Francisco and New York. They raised my expectations, in a good way.

I was the only woman in the porn theater who wasn’t working. I thought at first that the male customers would hassle me as I sat down in a torn velvet seat with my little notepad. But they didn’t bother me—they moved away as if I were a detective. I would have the entire aisle to myself.

I also realized that a lot of the men were having sex with each other in the back of the theater, both inspired by and indifferent to the largely heterosexual activity on screen. I remember feeling annoyed when I would hear them grunting, and I’d yell, “You’re missing a good part!”

I had a friend, now deceased, named Victor Chavez, who worked out of the Local 2 HERE (the San Francisco hospitality services union) banquet hall. We were both union organizers, a subject close my heart. But we discussed other things besides unfair contracts! He’s the one who opened his briefcase one day and told me that the two books he always carried with him were, one, the Bible, which he set out before us on a table. Next, he pulled out *How to Enlarge Your Penis*, which he told me was the second best-selling book in the world next to Genesis.

Victor had a Betamax video player, and a screen, which he insisted on loaning me so I could be a better critic. He believed in my potential. The screen was enormous and I could barely fit it in my single room. But I instantly grasped the intimacy of this new viewing experience. I could plug in my Magic Wand and make as much of a fuss as those guys at the Pussycat.

I understood the dual whammy of porn. All those people fucking and breathing hard, it gets to you—at least before you’ve reviewed a few thousand of them. It arouses you to distraction. On the other hand, I

was a huge movie buff, a film nerd, and I couldn't help but critique the bombs, the gaffes, the weird porn canards—as well as appreciate the directors who were obviously great talents.

You see, erotic filmmakers were the original indie filmmakers. The fact that their films turned you on was no different from a different genre scaring the daylights out of you, or making you cry. Films are great vehicles to elicit strong emotion. When they touch you on multiple levels simultaneously, we call them “masterpieces.”

The hardcore era that began in the late 1960s is now understood as part of the wave of independent films that broke away from the Hollywood studio system. The erotic filmmakers were pioneers in the same league as the spaghetti western directors or the producers of clumsy horror and sci-fi flicks. Sometimes, they were the same people. The permanent ghettoization of blue films was bizarre, and unwarranted by anything but the priggery of politicians.

When *Forum* hired me, there were a lot of porn “fan magazines,” but no independent reviews or genuine reporting. You would never see an article in a daily newspaper or legitimate magazine about the economics, aesthetics, or workaday world of the adult film industry. (The whole expression, “adult,” as a euphemism for “sex,” came into our vernacular because of legal battles that defined sexuality as a subject forbidden for young people's eyes).

It was truly the “twilight zone,” only referred to in legal and moral debates about obscenity. No guild reporter actually went out to a movie set or an office; no non-adult journalist knew the numbers. It was untouched territory, and I was the unlikely character who wandered into it with a pencil and pad.

There was one trade newsletter, like a one-sheet version of *Variety*, edited by Jared Rutter, called *Film World Reports*, which was read by producers and directors in the business. It listed the best-selling movies, who was buying what, classic insider bullet news. After all, they were certainly making money and deals, despite the indifference of the rest of the entertainment media. Decoding that sheet was one of my first accomplishments.

Yes, you could buy men's magazines where you'd read breathless interviews with the starlets, or read peanut-sized reviews that said things like “Steamy! Ceci is *so hot!*” It was advertising barely disguised as editorial. The people who wrote the reviews did not use their own names. It was as closeted a world as a pre-Stonewall gay bar.

The closest thing to erotic cinema criticism was at *Hustler* magazine, which deployed a famous graphic they created called the “peter-meter”

to cover the latest releases. With each title, the little penis would rise from the merely pudgy to raging hard-on.

“Peter” was always at least at half-mast, until one shocking day, *Hustler* gave a film a complete limp-dick rating. I was riveted by the reviewer, who used his own voice to say how revolted and disgusted he was by this insult to masculinity and good, clean X-rated fun.

Wow. Obviously *Hustler* had not been paid for this review. I decided if they hated this movie, it must be great.

I was right. The film was *Smoker*, made by a pair of film students from NYU who’d done art direction for Rinse Dream’s *Cafe Flesh*. Their names were Ruben Masters and Michael Constant. I saw *Smoker* the very next day at the Pussycat, and sure enough, it rattled several customers enough to leave the theater. I think it was the moment when David Christopher slipped a filmy blue women’s chemise over his chest and started slapping his cock against his belly, masturbating and fiercely monologuing to himself as he spied upon a neighbor next door. He’s not announced as trans, or cross-dressed, or any label at all. What he is doing is just his unexplained intimacy, so well acted and shot you feel like you’re in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* meets seventh-floor walkup in the Bowery.

These filmmakers used a pseudonym, Veronika Rocket. They’d broken so many rules, their genderfuck was so effortless, with such beauty, that I used their film as a benchmark for the rest of my erotic criticism career. I made a pilgrimage to Philadelphia to meet them and visit their original sets. Ruben Masters opened the door of her carriage house, looking like Louise Brooks in *Pandora’s Box* and checked me up and down. “Vodka stinger?” she said.

I had so many lucky breaks like that.

Meanwhile, I introduced myself to the baker’s dozen of blue film companies in Southern California and New York. I went to the annual trade conference in Vegas, which at the time was a tucked-away ghetto at the Consumer Electronics Convention, far from all the new TVs and stereos. I hung out in the ladies’ bathroom at the Sahara Hotel with copies of *On Our Backs* to initiate conversations with the “X” actresses who weren’t accustomed to anyone giving a damn about their real stories.

There were lots of men to talk to, of course. Most of the older ones were very conservative. A handful of men ran this business for years, a gin rummy game consortium, and they were as bigoted as Archie Bunker. They had a hard time believing I was there for real, not a joke, not a straight girl on a slumming lark.

My *Penthouse* column—and the video library I created at my old sex-

toy shop—sold so many videos that they had to endure me. They were jaded, and yet naïve about how much their world was changing.

They'd say the most incredible things on the record: "Women don't like to see anal sex; that's nasty. Any white actress who lets a black actor fuck her on screen is out of her mind; her career is through. How can a lesbian get pregnant; that's impossible! Don't you have a husband somewhere to look after?"

Some of their sons and daughters were more open, or openly rebelling. Punk rock, queer lib, and feminist sensibilities were hitting the artistic side of the "adult" industry. It was contagious.

It used to be a pop-and-son business tradition, almost quaint that way. One of the twenty-something heirs to the gin rummy game sat down with me one day and explained how Ruben Sturman, the granddaddy of the peepshow and the adult rain-coater industry, evaded the IRS for so long. How did he manage to never pay taxes? How did he run a business completely outside of the US establishment? Our conversation took place three years before Sturman finally got busted for good. My friend told me in detail how the money was generated, methodically picked up in bags, and moved from place to place.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked him.

"Because you make lesbian fist-fucking videos," he said.

I didn't realize how daring that act was until he said it. I had no idea that this was the key to mutual confidence—risk.

The lesbian feminist erotic world we'd created at *On Our Backs* was our own little cloister. We were innocent of what "was" and "wasn't" outside the law. If we had two lovers crazy about each other who wanted to be videotaped, we didn't tell them what to do. If they put their hands inside each other at the moment of orgasm, to our eyes, it was terribly romantic.

To the US Justice Department, it was just about the most obscene act ever. Go figure.

Everything women *actually* did to get off seemed to be against the blue laws, we found out. Women's orgasms, real orgasms, real female bodily fluids, were a no-no every time we tried to sell our magazine or videos in conservative states.

Places like Oklahoma and Florida said that G-spot ejaculations were illegal "water sports," "golden showers," and therefore on their list of community obscenities that violated the Miller standard. They didn't know anything about female anatomy or physiology—and they didn't care. You can see those same ideas today, in places like Alabama that

make possession of vibrators a crime. The old-school porn dudes called them “soft states”; I called them “women-don’t-cum” states.

On Our Backs, and our video arm, Fatale Video, were rudely introduced to the world of “legal obscenity” where nothing has anything to do with reality. Strangely, our unintended risk taking gave us the cred to be allowed into discussions in the hardcore boys’ room. They never would have talked to me otherwise.

Video changed everything—in porn first, then in Hollywood. The days of the peep shows and the theaters were numbered, although it’s interesting to see the peep show has outlasted the elegant theater. People still like to feed those coins in close quarters, the special claustrophobia of tight circumstances.

More importantly, video offered a way in for artists, entrepreneurs, and sex radicals—who, for better or worse, never would’ve made a movie before. A new, small set of geniuses were born, along with a much vaster set of mediocrities. Not different from film, just multiplied, like rabbits.

When I first heard from my readers at *Penthouse Forum*, who wrote me by hand (pre-email!), I realized two things. One, the overwhelming majority of women had never seen an erotic motion picture before. *At all*. Their furtive glances of still photos in men’s magazines were mostly female nudes. Maybe Burt Reynolds in his famous *Cosmo* spread.

But what about men? It wasn’t much more sophisticated. Very few men had seen more than a tiny sampling of erotic films. Ask a random man if he can name five or six full-length erotic movies he’s seen. If he is able to make such a list, he’s part of an exclusive club.

Watching erotic films—movies that are driven forward by sex scenes—is different from looking at single photos, pictorials, snippets, clips. The medium, the experience of going all the way through an eighty-minute feature, is an entirely different ride than a momentary glimpse, a fast-forward.

To prove it, I started throwing living room movie shows for my friends. I would give away my screener copies and show segments of my favorites. It was like I was offering free rocket tickets to the moon. My neighborhood audience was fascinated—and completely inexperienced.

The living room got a little bigger—I created an educational show-and-tell clips lecture called “How to Read a Dirty Movie,” and another one called “All Girl Action: The History of Lesbian Erotic Cinema,” which I started premiering at independent theaters like the Castro and the Roxie. I hit the festival circuit all over the world, including a daring mission by the British Film Institute to get my movies in, despite iron-clad UK customs rules against them.

One college-tour memory stands out. In rural Blacksburg, Virginia, a closeted gay student got ahold of student union funds for Friday Night Fun! at Virginia Tech to bring me out there for one of my clips shows. This is a school with a history of devotion to Southern white boys and military service. The students weren't even allowed to watch R-rated films on campus.

I didn't find out this history until I was moments away from the podium. My young sponsor looked like he'd just detonated a bomb and his face was covered in sweat. "My Dirty Movie" clips show started, which happens to begin with excerpts of two young handsome army cadets making out on a firing range. I thought the roof was going to cave in. Blacksburg boys were running for the doors, making vomiting sounds, screaming.

The students who stayed in their seats watched a full spectrum of sexual and human emotion, delivered by porn's finest auteurs. They got more sex education in one hundred minutes than they'd had in their entire lives.

The stunned president of the Young Republicans, a co-sponsor of Friday Night Fun!, took me out to a fast food dinner afterward. He told me that he found it curious that the scenes of *lesbians* making love had pleased him, while the scenes of gay men had given him a stomachache. I was impressed that he was calm enough to observe his own reactions.

"I don't disagree with all of what you do," he said, "but I think it's entirely unjust that you receive checks from the government for your homosexuality."

I stared at him with my mouth full of fries. "Oh, it's not that bad," I said, "I only get half as much because I'm bisexual."

The success of the clips shows, despite Blacksburg, led me further into the university world. I started a class called The Politics of Sexual Representation at the University of California, Santa Cruz; it was a rewarding teaching experience. The students were prepared to look at material that was considered ephemeral or taboo, and decode it.

In film circles, in the Ivy League schools, among artists, and art historians, this thing called "porn" became a sophisticated interest, with many reporters and scholars following the same leads that had inspired me so long ago. The public developed a sense of normality and better still, *humor* about porn, which had been missing when I began my "Erotic Screen" column.

Much like the topic of gay life, the "porn debate" seems to exist in two parallel worlds. On one side, it's old hat, a yawn. In the other world, Planet Prude, the legal and public policy climate is fundamentalist. Poli-

ticians and religious leaders employ sex as their bogeyman more vociferously than ever, enlisting liberal as well as conservative support.

The twenty-first century Gilded Age is one of moralism and slut shaming for the general public—while corruption and Caligula-like license is the rule for the elite. My entrée into the “golden age” of porn looks so utopian now! The 1970s and 1980s were a heyday for women’s progress in journalism, for coming out of the closet, for breaking down once impermeable barriers in both the media and sex-film trade. I was dubbed the “Pauline Kael of Porn” in 1986 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, but within a few years there would come to be dozens of reporters and critics covering the erotic film industry and its offerings. It was truly our “Porno Spring!” The art and academic establishment confronted erotic desire; what was once ephemeral drew potent scholarly attention. Among the cognoscenti, blue movies became historic. I was voted into the Fourth Estate Hall of Fame of the X-Rated Critics Organization in 2002.

I was lucky to wander in, like Alice in Wonderland finding the cake with “Eat Me” on it. I’m very glad I did. Unlike Alice, I never went back to being small.

Emotional Truths and Thrilling Slide Shows: The Resurgence of Antiporn Feminism



CLARISSA SMITH and FEONA ATTWOOD

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Feona Attwood is a professor at Middlesex University, UK. She is the editor of *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture and Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, and the co-editor of the following special journal issues: *Controversial Images* (with Sharon Lockyer, *Popular Communication*); *Researching and Teaching Sexually Explicit Media* (with I.Q. Hunter, *Sexualities*); and *Investigating Young People’s Sexual Cultures* (with Clarissa Smith, *Sex Education*).

At an antipornography conference at Wheelock College in Boston in 2007, Gail Dines described the gathering as “the resurgence of a new national movement to liberate women from misogyny and oppression,” and the moment for the launching of a new organization, Stop Porn Culture.¹ The notion of a “porn culture” has become an important rubric for the range of campaigns and writings that have sprung up in the first decade of the 2000s. These include the evangelical crusades of

XXXchurch.com, whose slogan is “Jesus Loves Porn Stars,” and Michael Leahy’s Porn Nation tours that focus on porn addiction, both launched in 2002; the launch of the UK group Object that campaigns against “sex object culture” in 2003;² popular books by journalists such as *Pornified* by Pamela Paul and *Female Chauvinist Pigs* by Ariel Levy, both in 2005; and a range of policy reports, beginning with the Australian discussion paper, “Corporate Paedophilia,” by Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze in 2006. These declamations of concern over the rise of a “porn culture” join numerous confessional narratives by reformed or rescued insiders, such as Shelley Lubben’s account of life in the porn industry, which purports to offer the “truth behind the fantasy” of a trade in flesh.³ All of these accounts present their interventions as driven by alarm at the spectacular new visibility of pornography made possible first by video and reaching its apotheosis through the Internet and other mobile technologies.

Antiporn feminism has re-emerged within this “new” culture of visibility and while it continues to label pornography with tendentious definitions like “sexually explicit material that sexualizes hierarchy, objectification, submission, and/or violence,”⁴ it now sets this in the context of a “pornified” or “sexualized” culture—“a different cultural moment” in which “porn has taken over the culture.”⁵ Books such as Gail Dines’s *Pornland* (2010), Karen Boyle’s *Everyday Pornography* (2010), and Melinda Tankard Reist’s *Getting Real* (2009) focus on the ways in which culture is increasingly debased by the seeping of pornographic practices, styles, and experiences into the mainstream. In this context of cultural change, they also argue that there is “a new receptivity” to anti-porn arguments in which women report that they “feel that they’ve been really naive,” have “been duped by . . . all these glamorizing messages,” or have had “an inchoate sense that something was seriously wrong,” while men confess their “compulsive use” of porn and its toxic effects on their relationships and sense of self.⁶ In this essay we focus on three areas of discussion: how the re-emergence of antiporn feminism and its formulation of the pornography “problem” builds upon but also differentiates itself from earlier versions of antipornography feminism, and how it may be seen as characteristic of sex panic scripts and conservative common sense views of sex; how gender, bodies, and representations are presented in their arguments; and how the particular model of “healthy” sex inherent in these arguments has much less to do with gender than with a view of the world that is highly suspicious of reason, culture, technology, and representation itself.

Sexual Panic

It is no doubt a truism to claim that ideas and campaigns have their time, that for a multitude of reasons a particular argument will find a comfortable home in the academy, popular cultural commentary, and media representations. It will be discussed everywhere, debated at conferences, referenced in policy actions, and used to justify interventions whether institutional, political, or juridical. For a time, particular names associated with a campaign, a way of thinking, or an approach will become as familiar as the brands, celebrities, or politicians we encounter everyday. Certainly, the last five years have seen a flood of news reports, op-eds, policy documents, and calls for increased legislation against the “pernicious tide” of sexually explicit representations in music, film, and new communication technologies, and names such as Dines and Reist have been regularly name-checked across academic, popular, and institutional discussions.

The authors behind the current wave of antipornography campaigning draw on the arguments of 1970s and 1980s antiporn feminists but do so in interesting ways—for example, although they build on the central tenets of Andrea Dworkin’s analysis of the misogyny and cruelty of pornographers, they posit this as a prescient account but one that could never have envisaged the “juggernaut” of the Internet.⁷ Melinda Tankard Reist argues that, “What was once considered unthinkable is now ordinary.”⁸ Both Dines and her campaign group Stop Porn Culture play on this future-foretold, yet beyond imagining, in their constant reiteration that contemporary porn “is not your father’s *Playboy*.”⁹ The idea is that middle-aged adults have a cozy, even rose-tinted view of Dad’s stash of pornography, accidentally discovered during their teens—and a belief that their version of sexual liberation has come to pass. Dines claims that we are witnessing “something new,” “a social experiment” that is a wake-up call: “we don’t know where it is going,” and neither do the pornographers who are “taken by surprise at how cruel and body-punishing [images are that] the fans are asking for.”¹⁰

This complex narrative of nostalgia and futurology is a central theme of these accounts where pornography is acknowledged as an already existing feature of the landscape, but one that has developed outside the knowledge of “ordinary” adults and needs urgent redress. The key component of change is the widespread accessibility of the Internet and its ability to bring “outlier” sexual interests to the attention of naturally inquisitive but innocent children:

If your partner is over 40, his sexual development was probably inspired by the underwear pages of a Kays catalogue. Just 10 years ago, most teenagers might have seen only soft porn magazines such as *Playboy*. Yet today's children are just a click away from a world of "scat babes" (women covered in excrement), "bukkkake" (women weeping in distress while several men ejaculate over their faces), or websites offering an entire menu of rape scenes, from incest to raped virgins.¹¹

As the quotation indicates, Aitkenhead's article contrasted the harmless pleasures that characterized the first sexual stirrings of today's over-forty population, with their children's experience of being assaulted by rape, minority sexual interests, and the sexualized distress of women forced to engage in ever more extreme acts. In her address to a presumed audience of coupled, heterosexual women, male sexuality is naturalized as inquisitive, but in danger of taking a wrong turn if subjected to the wrong kinds of images at too early an age. Aitkenhead calls upon her readers to reflect on their own experiences of life with men who were schooled in the quaint transgressions of the Kays catalogue, and to envisage the tortured imaginings and sexual mores of future generations of men who, as children, have seen the excesses of bukkkake. It is this mangling of what had seemed genuinely yet innocently transgressive in the halcyon days of the 1970s that renders contemporary pornography so potentially threatening, made all the worse by being too easily obtained.

It is tempting to name this moment of concern about pornography a moral panic—a spontaneous and sporadic episode of excessive worrying about "a condition, episode, person, or group of persons [who] become defined as a threat to societal values and interests."¹² In Cohen's account, the mass media have a pivotal role as they fashion and orchestrate these episodes by amplifying supposed "dangers" and calling for political intervention against a newly identified "folk devil" or "monster." However, we'd suggest that, like the "problem" of AIDS, the contemporary prominence of antipornography sensitivity is best understood as "the latest variation in the spectacle of the defensive ideological rear-guard action which has been mounted on behalf of 'the family'" for more than a century.¹³

The voices raised against pornography take their place among the many and various worries about family breakdown, infidelity, rising STI (sexually transmitted infections) rates, AIDS, teenage pregnancies, abortion, promiscuous sex, gay marriage, and more generalized fears of homosexuality. In sexual matters there is an "endless 'overhead' narrative" of anxieties that influence and are, in turn, influenced by wor-

ries about sexually explicit media.¹⁴ Thus, as Watney suggests, the label “moral panic” does not suffice in this instance because

Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* ideological struggle over the meanings of signs. A particular “moral panic” merely marks the site of the current front-line in such struggles. We do not in fact witness the unfolding of discontinuous and discrete “moral panics,” but rather the mobility of ideological confrontation across the entire field of public representations, and in particular those handling and evaluating the meanings of the human body, where rival and incompatible forces and values are involved in a ceaseless struggle to define supposedly universal “human” truths.¹⁵

As Watney notes, pornography and its consumers are not “made” into a *new* “folk devil” by a spontaneously hysterical press (or feminists). Instead the seeking of inspiration and pleasure outside the sacred dyad of matrimony “is always, and has always been, constructed as intrinsically monstrous within the entire system of heavily over-determined images inside which notions of ‘decency,’ ‘human nature,’ and so on are mobilized and relayed throughout the internal circuitry of the mass media marketplace.”¹⁶

It may be more fruitful to think of the antiporn resurgence within the more generalized and ever-present trope of “sex panics,”¹⁷ those “volatile battles over sexuality” where moral values are turned into political action.¹⁸ The scenarios of sex panics rely on a format designed to structure discussion in a particular way. A target of blame is established through its potential to destabilize normative sexuality and practice, and individuals may be publicly shamed, but are so within the context of the constant, private self-policing of individual deviation from the ideal. The edifice of heteronormativity, and the family structure that is its ideal, is presented as constantly under threat—not just from outsiders or refuse-niks—but “everywhere, and at all times.”¹⁹ Thus panics about sex draw on narratives of danger, disease, and depravity to which “we” are all susceptible, and rely on the repetition of “evocative sexual language and imagery” that urges “us” to be vigilant at all times, both as members of communities and as individuals.²⁰

Unlike academic discussion, which tends to prize a logical, calm, and rational mode of presentation, the scenarios produced in sex panics rely on the stirring up of public feeling that is presented as the real “site of truth and ethics.”²¹ Yet, although they suggest passion and authenticity, these scenarios are tightly scripted. They draw their power from the

broader emotional culture of sex: “an affectively dense mix” of dread, excitement, shame, and fear, often working to produce an emotional arc of “outrage, anger, and disgust.”²² They may also provoke a “frisson of pleasure” for their audiences that mixes together sociality, emotional arousal, righteousness, and “the thrill of collective rage.”²³ The “overhead narrative” of the threat to normative and ideal sexuality and the accompanying moments of panic are dangerous because of their capacity to “exert a widespread chilling effect on art, academic scholarship, political activism, and journalism,” because they “operate to the advantage of social and religious conservatives,” and because they are a “crucial vehicle for consolidating political power” for the Christian right.²⁴

In what follows, we are not so much interested in arguing against antiporn analyses as in exploring the ways in which they tap into the ever-present constructions of “appropriate,” “natural,” and “decent” that underpin the suspicion of pornography as a threat to normative sexuality and “proper” relationships. In examining antiporn feminism in this way, we need to recognize the ways in which it frames, names, and delineates the “problem” so that it is usable by the mass media. Antiporn feminists are not the only participants in public discourse about sex, sexuality, and pornography—they are joined by an assortment of journalists, politicians, and activists in shaping the boundaries of what should be discussed, how it should be discussed, what constitutes proper evidence, and what constitutes the terrain of “the problem.” Drawing attention to the points of consensus involves a recognition that mass media generally present debates about pornography as battles between opposing sides where what is most important is the disagreement rather than the detail of evidence offered. Take as an example the recent debate in the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper entitled “Can Sex Films Empower Women?” between Gail Dines and Anna Span.²⁵ This kind of debate may involve *balance*—two sides get to offer their views—but this is not so important as the space accorded to readers to adjudicate as *normal*, *ordinary*, and *everyday* humans. Neither combatant is presented as *like* the readers—Dines is an academic feminist and Span is a pornographer—so that a space opens up for individuals to orientate themselves to the expositions of the problem and then respond to them in relation to the morally constituted category of heterosexuality. And here we do not mean heterosexuality as a sexual orientation but as “the norm,” an ideal and a position to be policed and protected. Debates like this rule out questions about the varieties of pornographies, their origins and makeup, their significance to different sexual identities and subjectivities, and

instead focus attention on what it is *safe* to tolerate for the good of the social institutions through which *ordinary* men, women, and children live their lives.

It would be disingenuous to claim that antiporn activism gets a wider hearing than any other approach—there *are* media spaces for plural and divergent opinions on pornography. Similarly, in the porn studies that have been developed by other feminist academics, by gay male scholars, by researchers with an interest in new media and technology, and by sex-positive, sex-radical, and sex worker activists, there are the beginnings of accounts of the history, production, distribution, consumption, and significance of diverse pornographies. But in most public debates, arguments that do not begin from a suspicion of pornography are relatively invisible, and the discussion there can only operate within certain limits because the terrain has been so clearly demarcated by a framework of concern and the “overhead narrative” of “natural” sexuality. By far the most visible pro-porn stance in public debates is the argument for free speech and the individual’s right to choose to engage with pornography. Yet, defending pornography as free speech does little to challenge the presentation of porn as a singular form in which the degradation or subordination of women is played out or as irredeemably harmful to children who see it “too early.” Free speech arguments merely require that sexually explicit materials should not be censored for adults, and that in free and democratic societies pornography should be tolerated. But this toleration is always an unstable achievement for any minority grouping or interest, open to reassessment and redefinition at any time. And in making arguments for free speech, its proponents often cede the ground that *some* forms of pornography are indeed awful, damaging, and to be abhorred, thereby confirming the basic analysis that there is something intrinsically problematic about both the cultural forms of sexual representation and those who seek them out.

Thus, while antiporn feminism has been extensively critiqued for its lack of theoretical rigor, shaky evidence base, and failure to distinguish its position from other highly conservative views of sexuality and gender, it has retained significant purchase in both academic and more populist spheres as a perspective that can only ever be circumnavigated. In what follows, we want to trace the ways in which contemporary antiporn feminism is increasingly rejecting academic terrains of analysis and debate in favor of appeals to common sense and emotional intelligence, precisely because this is the ground on which their arguments find most fertile purchase.

**“We are all sitting here with our common sense”:
Academia and Antiporn Feminism**

In her discussion of the antiporn roadshows of the 1980s and 1990s, Eithne Johnson noted the use of slide shows to create spectacles that “purport to instruct even as they promise to titillate and/or terrify their audiences.”²⁶ The roadshows were hybrid pornographic/educational attractions, privileging a kind of knowledge that discards the scholarly apparatus of analysis—the setting out of theoretical frameworks and discussions of methodology, contextualization, consideration of diverse approaches, dissection of examples, development of conclusions based on evidence, and so on. As Johnson also notes, they depended for their impact on precisely the set of characteristics that their proponents attributed to pornography: re-presenting women’s bodies as “gory, glossy body-part imagery” in a series of “shock cuts.” Over this, the presenter constructed a narrative inviting horror and outrage as the appropriate reactions for reading the images. This presentational style has, as Lynne Segal has described, also dominated the written work of some antiporn feminists, drawing on “sadistic sexual imagery,” employing the arts of “arousal and manipulation,” mimicking the horrific, shocking qualities that they attribute to pornography, and thereby reproducing what they imagine to be a “pornographic” view of the world.²⁷

The antiporn slide show has now been updated for the twenty-first century. In their discussion of the slide shows being produced by Stop Porn Culture in the US, Karen Boyle and others describe how these differ from academic work on pornography. Presenters “get out of the academy and into the real world where people live their lives.”²⁸ The slide show is designed to have “impact,” especially for women who “haven’t seen much if any pornography,” and it takes its female audience “on a journey” in which they are “pretty shocked” but leave “feeling unbelievably validated.” The power of the slide show depends on its difference from academic work that, it is argued, involves “abstract intellectual arguments” and which is less concerned with activism than with “bringing out books that won’t make waves in the academy.”²⁹

This presentational style is indicative of the scenarios constructed by conservative groups in the creation of sex panics more generally. Understanding this style is important because it demonstrates how antiporn feminism operates as a particular form of knowledge and how sex panic style is central to its appeal, and suggests why, despite having no credible intellectual position or evidence base, antiporn feminism is compelling

for some. Indeed, although some recent writings such as the collection edited by Karen Boyle are presented as though they are academic work, and although they claim to be based in theory and evidence, anti-porn feminism has generally become increasingly and more openly hostile to scholarly work than in the past. In the discussion about slide shows for example, it is claimed that “If you give examples of what women at slide shows say, or feel, or think, academics will say, ‘That can’t be true, because it hasn’t been researched’ or ‘Show me the evidence of that’ which minimizes women’s feelings and reactions.”³⁰ Porn is described as an “intellectual game” for academics working in environments which “have been primed to almost robotically generate certain kinds of objections. . . .”³¹

This dislike of academia is linked to a more general set of suspicions about media and commerce in antiporn writing. In the *Getting Real* collection, links between commerce, media, sex work, pornography, and academia are repeatedly drawn; the media is “a de facto pimp for the prostitution and pornography industries”³² and there is an “unholy alliance . . . between certain post-modern academics and the most aggressive agents of consumerism, the marketing industry (including the porn industry).”³³ In Abigail Bray’s discussion of the defenses mounted of artist Bill Henson’s photographs—one of a number of recent media events in which art featuring naked children has been described as pornographic and pedophilic—the term “moral panic” is described as “upwardly mobile,” one that “operates politically to do the work of neoliberal tolerance by governing the public gaze and erasing feminist critiques.”³⁴ In Bray’s discussion, the more honest reading of Henson’s photographs is one that risks “spouting the vulgar sentiments of the moralizing masses . . . even if this means going against the grain of a gentrified academic subjectivity.”³⁵ Here the possibility of any position that does not proceed from morality and feeling is dismissed. It is merely “the governmentality of the private upper-class art gallery—the compulsory celebration of sexual transgression, the genteel inbred world of experts . . . a normative technology of the progressive middle-class self.”³⁶ From these perspectives, academic expertise is robotic, genteel, and inauthentic, and theory and evidence are self-indulgent and untrustworthy. As one of the roundtable discussants in Boyle’s book argues, “we are all sitting here with our common sense. We can look at the material, think about the messages it’s sending, and reason our way through to at least some tentative conclusions.”³⁷

Back into the Charmed Circle: Porn Sex v. Healthy Sex

As Gayle Rubin wrote in 1984, much discussion of sexuality is based on the idea of a “charmed circle,” characterized by sex that is heteronormative, vanilla, procreative, coupled, taking place between people of the same generation, at home, involving bodies only, and avoiding commercial sex and pornography. Beyond this lie the “outer limits” of sex: promiscuous, nonprocreative, casual, nonmarried, homosexual, cross-generational, taking place alone or in groups, in public, involving S/M, commerce, manufactured objects, and pornography. Feminist critiques of porn have often made clear the need to distinguish their objections from those based on moral or religious grounds, or on the offense to taste or decency caused by pornography. Yet recent antiporn feminist work does not focus particularly on the problematic aspects of gender in porn, neither adopting a broader critique of sexism in media, nor pursuing an analysis of how sexist materials might be contrasted with nonsexist pornography or other forms of sexually explicit media. Instead it seems more concerned with the idea of “healthy sexuality” characterized by Rubin in her description of the charmed circle of sex. One of the ways that this is articulated by Dines depends on the use of the term “porn sex,” which is used to indicate sex that is debased, dehumanized, formulaic, and generic—“industrial strength sex” compared to sex that involves “empathy, tenderness, caring, affection” . . . “love, respect, or connection to another human being.”³⁸

This ideal of healthy sex is further circumscribed in terms of the acts that are permissible within it. For Dines, anal sex, ejaculation on a woman’s body or face, and more than one man having sex with one woman are degrading. References to “addiction,” “grooming,” “pimping,” and “hooking up” pepper the literature produced by Stop Porn Culture, drawing together a view of sex as inherently dangerous with fears about child abuse, commercial sex, and casual sex, as though these were all not only related but also uniformly problematic and all with their origins in “porn culture.”

In Stop Porn Culture’s slide show, “It’s Easy Out Here for a Pimp,” the distinction between “porn-related sex” and “healthy sex” is spelled out more explicitly using a series of oppositions taken from the book, *The Porn Trap*, by sex therapists Malz & Malz.³⁹ Porn sex involves “using someone” and “doing to someone.” It is a “performance for others,” a “public commodity,” “separate from love,” “emotionally distant.” It “can be degrading” and “irresponsible,” “involves deception” and “impulse gratification,” “compromises values,” and “feels shameful.” In contrast,

healthy sex is about “caring for someone” and “sharing with a partner.” It is a “private experience,” “personal treasure,” “an expression of love,” and “nurturing.” It is “always respectful,” “approached responsibly,” “requires honesty,” “involves all the senses,” “enhances who you really are,” and provides “lasting satisfaction.” This view of good sex as private rather than public, and clearly linked to love rather than to gratification, is also found in Robert Jensen’s work. Jensen argues that sex should involve “a sense of connection to another person, a greater awareness of one’s own humanity and sometimes, even a profound sense of the world that can come from meaningful and deep sexual experience.”⁴⁰

But it is hard to see why these characteristics should be especially important for sexual politics or for feminism, or why feminists should value sex in terms of its capacity to develop intimacy rather than for any other reason. In fact, they correspond much more clearly to a view of sex as sacred or “special,” and to the contemporary ideal of the pure relationship that Anthony Giddens describes, in which sex is anchored to emotional coherence and persistence.⁴¹ Casual sex, kinky sex, rough sex, and even monogamous, straight, vanilla sex that might be the product of routine, boredom, fun, or thrill-seeking, does not meet these standards. A proper purpose for sex is assumed and there is no consideration of the variety of sexual practices that people engage in, diverse understandings of what sex is, or the multifarious reasons why people have sex. Although they vehemently reject being characterized as “antisex,” writers like Dines foreclose the possibilities of sexuality as plural and in process.

Antiporn feminism’s attempt to define what is healthy extends beyond sex to a whole series of oppositions in the Boyle roundtable discussion.⁴² Here, health is equated with nourishing food, experience, creativity, authenticity, being and sensing, politics and activism, the real world, common sense, and testimony. Against this is set a world of unhealthiness, characterized by a wide range of things: McDonalds hamburgers, industrial products, images, the generic and formulaic, appearing, performing, acting, being looked at, by academia, self-interest, individualism, elitism, theory, and interpretation. In this view, not only are most expressions of sexuality unhealthy, so is anything that has been mass-produced, along with some forms of self-presentation, intellectual work, and representation. Indeed, there is an enormous amount of distrust of mediation of any kind; the “healthy” world is imagined as one in which industry, commerce, and representation appear not to exist, and where even some acts of expressing the self or interpreting the world become suspect if they are somehow not direct enough. This

view is made explicit in Robert Jensen's argument that we should try to "transcend . . . mediated culture and explore things in more direct ways." Because "sex is a form of communication . . . with others" and "with ourselves in some sense as well," it should involve "direct face to face human contact," which in "this hyper-mediated culture" is becoming harder to achieve.⁴³

Saving Men

In this regard it is interesting to look at the ways in which men have been figured in the new antiporn writings. To quote Dines,

I get a lot of men coming up to me confessing their compulsive use: that never happened before. I get a lot of hopelessness from women because they're trying to date men and they can't find men who haven't used pornography. And I always say, "You're not likely to find a man who hasn't used pornography. That's not the issue. The issue is whether he continues to use it once you've given him the analysis."⁴⁴

Here there is a naturalizing of male interest in pornography and an implication that this may just be because of the ubiquity of pornography. Women should "give the analysis" and this should be enough to turn the porn viewer into an appropriate mate. The "analysis" is of course that pornography is wrong, but that it also "hijacks" sexuality, and that using it is a symptom of weakness, demonstrating a lack of imagination, self-knowledge, and critical judgment. Recent antiporn feminist writings have tended to distance themselves from the much criticized notion of "effects" drawn from laboratory studies to focus on a view of men as programmed by their viewing habits. In these narratives of addiction, men come to prefer "porn sex" and pressure their partners to behave like porn stars. This may have the further deleterious result of finding porn more of a turn-on than their partners, losing the ability to get or maintain an erection, or experiencing difficulty with ejaculation, thereby damaging their authentic sexuality and destroying emotional intimacy in relationships.

Men talk about their compulsive use and how difficult it is to stop. Men are telling me that all they know about sex they learned from pornography, because they started using it at such an early age—it's almost like it's encoded into their sexual DNA. Some want to bring porn into their intimate relationships, others need to conjure up porn images to ejaculate with partners, and still others have lost interest in sex with real women. To show just how porn destroys

creativity, men have told me that once they stopped using porn they didn't know how to masturbate.⁴⁵

The “domino theory” of the passions is invoked here along with a search for increasing levels of stimulation that leads inevitably toward more misogynous and damaging material.⁴⁶ Pornography programs men's sexual instincts and can have only one possible trajectory—to ever more encounters with sexually explicit imagery and toward more and more “extreme” material. Men's sexuality is figured as totally plastic, intrinsically so—a barely constrained appetite that has to be civilized and ought to be kept away from the inflammatory influence of sexual media for its own good. Dines notes that the “addicted young men I speak to do indeed end up in serious trouble. They neglect their school work, spend huge amounts of money they don't have, become isolated from others, and often suffer depression. They know something is wrong, feel out of control, and don't know how to stop. Some of the most troubling stories I hear are from men who have become so desensitized that they have started using harder porn and end up masturbating to images that had previously disgusted them. Many of these men are deeply ashamed and frightened, as they don't know where all this will end.”⁴⁷

Fortunately, the antiporn “analysis” is able to save them:

For the men [being upset by the slide show], it's not (usually) that they haven't seen these kinds of images before, but that they are being cued to see them differently. Often, what disturbs them most is that similar images haven't disturbed them in the past. They realise that they've been manipulated in the service of the industry's profits and their involvement with pornography has kept them from developing an authentic sexuality in accordance with their own values.⁴⁸

This enlightenment—realizing “they've been manipulated in the service of profits”—is reinforced by the rising popularity of stories of porn addiction elsewhere. Michael Leahy describes porn as America's number one addiction, while Christian singer Clay Crosse confesses to being tempted and “battling with lust fuelled by pornography,” a problem he apparently shares with more than 50 percent of US churchgoers.⁴⁹ Across the Internet—the space that is supposed to have been colonized by porn—tales of terrible struggles against porn's influence are rolled out. They are indeed compelling stories, and are now being backed up with all the authority of the latest “scientific” research that claims the pleasure centers of the brain are rewired from watching “too much” porn.

And as these narratives of pain, destruction of relationships, failures

of penile function, and compulsive self-abuse unfold, they also offer a powerful possibility of redemption, renewal, and rebirth. Many porn addiction confessions are attached to recommended interventions: the quiz to determine if your use is obsessive, the Net Nanny, the six-month detox, and if all else fails, “keylogger software that will track every move you make on the Internet” and “accountability software that will . . . also send a weekly report to your ‘accountability partner’ to keep them up to speed on the sites you’re visiting.” Men can be reassured they’re not alone, “. . . with a combination of therapy, Internet filters, affirmations, accountability, and research it [porn addiction] can be overcome.”⁵⁰

The view that underpins this approach can be usefully compared to the “crystal clear set of guidelines” about sex, set out in evangelical Christian and other conservative antiporn campaigns: “sexual pleasure is for men and women to enjoy inside marriage,” but those who fall from grace and are willing to repent can be forgiven.⁵¹ Under the guise of a politics based on gender equality, antiporn feminist writings are increasingly modeled on this religious approach to porn, though using a medical model of “healthy sex” and discourses that encourage men to see themselves as addicts, or the victims of “grooming” by pornographers or popular culture, as “abused,” “consumed,” and desensitized. These allow us to imagine male porn consumers as the “target for ruthless commercial exploitation,” as harmed and suffering, but able to pursue “healing, connection and moral regeneration.”⁵²

Antiporn feminism has proved incredibly resistant to the academic practices of theory and evidence, preferring to counter opposition with appeals to emotional truths. More than ever it relies on “testimony,” though whose testimony counts is still a problem—those who testify to porn’s pleasures or sense of liberation don’t count in the same way as those who present themselves as addicts, victims, or rescuers. It is perhaps unsurprising that this position has become so loudly voiced and in such a manner in the current political climate. It is, as Lynne Segal noted in 1998, a “winning ticket” in conservative times, not least because it offers both women and men the prospect of “easy identifications, the pleasures of the familiar repackaged as radical, the comforts of conservatism, and the dismissal of past feminist victories and any serious possibilities for change.”⁵³ The use of testimony, alongside the thrilling attractions of the antiporn slide show, comprises a key mode of expression in the telling of sexual stories for contemporary antiporn feminism. These are spun out in narratives that, although heavily dependent upon a narrow and scripted evidence base, have become reified as the authentic voice of truth and feeling. Rhetoric rather than reason is

the preferred mode of debate, similar in style to the testimonies used in Christian religious revivals, though couched in the language of health. It is a type of speech that fits with a particular form of knowing, one rooted in the bones and a kind of common sense that does not need theory or evidence to support it.

Notes

1. Chris Boulton, "Porn and Me(n): Sexual Morality, Objectification, and Religion at the Wheelock Anti-Pornography Conference," *The Communication Review* 11, no. 3 (2008): 249–50.

2. Pornnation.org, Object.org.uk.

3. Shelley Lubben, *Truth Behind the Fantasy of Porn: The Greatest Illusion on Earth* (CreateSpace, 2010); shelleylubben.com.

4. "It's Easy Out Here for a Pimp: How a Porn Culture Grooms Kids for Sexual Exploitation," slide show, Stop Porn Culture, accessed February 24, 2012, <http://stop-pornculture.org/toolkit-for-easy-out-here/>.

5. Gail Dines, Linda Thompson, Rebecca Whisnant, with Karen Boyle, "Arresting Images: Anti-Pornography Slide Shows, Activism and the Academy," in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. Karen Boyle (London: Routledge, 2010), 21.

6. Dines et al., "Arresting Images," 21–24.

7. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

8. Melinda Tankard Reist, ed., *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2009), 11.

9. A Google search for this exact phrase turns up more than twelve thousand hits. Dines used it as a title for an article (2010) but it has also been widely adopted by journalists, politicians, and other cultural commentators, indicating its resonance as a call-to-arms for a generation of adults who are supposedly ignorant of the trajectory porn has taken.

10. Gail Dines, interview, *American Morning*, CNN, July 28, 2010.

11. Decca Aitkenhead, "Are Teenagers Hooked on Porn?" *Psychologies*, 2010, <http://www.psychologies.co.uk/family/are-teenagers-hooked-on-porn/>.

12. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 9.

13. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (London: Continuum, 1997), 43.

14. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 41.

15. *Ibid.*, 42.

16. *Ibid.*, 42.

17. Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

18. Janice Irvine, "Transient Feelings: Sex Panics and the Politics of Emotions," in *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight Over Sexual Rights*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 234.

19. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 43.

20. Irvine 2009, "Transient Feelings," 253.

21. Ibid., "Transient Feelings," 235.
22. Ibid., "Transient Feelings," 243.
23. Ibid., "Transient Feelings," 244.
24. Janice Irvine, "Emotional Scripts of Sex Panic," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 3, no. 3 (2006): 86.
25. Emine Saner, "Can Sex Films Empower Women?" *The Guardian*, March 4, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/05/conversation-gail-dines-anna-arrowsmith>.
26. Eithne Johnson, "Appearing Live on Your Campus!: Porn-education Roadshows," *Jump Cut* 41 (1997): 27–35, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC41folder/PornEdRoadshows.html>.
27. Lynne Segal, "Only the Literal: The Contradictions of Anti-Pornography Feminism," *Sexualities* 1, no. 1 (1998): 44, 56.
28. Dines et al., "Arresting Images," 29.
29. Ibid., 17, 18, 23, 24, 17, 29.
30. Karen Boyle, ed., *Everyday Pornography* (London: Routledge, 2010), 30.
31. Boyle, *Everyday Pornography*, 30, 27.
32. Reist, *Getting Real*, 20.
33. Clive Hamilton, "Good is the New Bad: Rethinking Sexual Freedom," in *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, ed. Melinda Tankard Reist (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2009), 95.
34. Abigail Bray, "Governing the Gaze: Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics and the Post-Feminist Blindspot," *Feminist Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009): 184.
35. Bray, "Governing the Gaze," 185.
36. Ibid., 181.
37. Dines et al., "Arresting Images," 31.
38. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), x, xxiv, xi.
39. Wendy Malz and Larry Malz, *The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide To Overcoming Problems Caused By Porn* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
40. Jensen in Boulton, "Porn and Me(n)," 257.
41. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993).
42. Dines et al., "Arresting Images," 17–33.
43. "The Full Interview with Robert Jensen," by F*Bomb, *UWeekly Austin*, April 6, 2011, <http://uweeklyaustin.com/blogs/f-bomb/posts/the-full-interview-with-robert-jensen-116/>.
44. Dines et al., "Arresting Images," 24.
45. Ibid., 31.
46. Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1985), 150.
47. Gail Dines, "How The Hardcore Porn Industry Is Ruining Young Men's Lives," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2011, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/how-the-hardcore-porn-industry-is-ruining-young-mens-lives-20110517-1erac.html#ixzz1b4dlVQCm>.
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52. Rebecca Whisnant, "From Jekyll to Hyde: The Grooming of Male Pornography Consumers," in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. Karen Boyle (London: Routledge, 2010), 115, 132.

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“What’s a Nice Girl Like You . . .”



CANDIDA ROYALLE

Candida Royalle, president of Femme Productions, is a frequent TV and radio guest and sought-after expert on relationships, sexuality, and women’s self-empowerment. She is the author of *How to Tell a Naked Man What to Do: Sex Advice From a Woman Who Knows*. Royalle was a popular adult film star during the “golden age” of porn, between the years of 1975 and 1980. With that firsthand experience, Royalle felt she could effect change within the adult film industry, providing a woman’s voice to a previously male-dominated genre. Royalle pioneered the genre of erotic movies by and for women and couples. Widely used by counselors and sexologists, her work has received international accolades for its sex-positive and egalitarian approach to sexuality and eroticism. In 1995 Royalle, along with Groet Design, a Dutch industrial design company, created the Natural Contours line of stylish and discreet intimate massagers. Royalle has lectured at the Smithsonian Institute, the American Psychiatric Association’s national conference, and the World Congress on Sexology, as well as numerous universities including Princeton, Columbia, Wellesley College, and New York University. Royalle is a member of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) and a founding board member of Feminists for Free Expression (FFE). For more, see candidaroyalle.com.

Sitting down to an interview, inevitably the first thing I’m asked is how I got into porn. I often get the sense that what they’d really like to ask me is, “What’s a nice girl like you . . . ?” The image of hardened street urchins scraping together enough money to cop some drugs lingers on, despite the flashy celebrity of porn star Jenna Jameson. Our society still can’t conceive that a relatively sane young woman would choose to go into sex work for any reason other than desperation. It goes against all cultural standards of acceptability for women. It is also important to marginalize female sex workers, lest our tender young

daughters imagine a career in what is still considered terribly taboo. One hundred years ago women were declared diseased nymphomaniacs if they wanted more sex than their husbands; today, even though women are granted the right to sexual fulfillment, the double standard is alive and well, and women are still controlled through fear of the dreaded "slut" label. Becoming a sex worker crosses the line into forbidden territory: How dare we use our bodies and our sexuality to earn a living or merely express ourselves? Who gave us the right to absolute control over our bodies and our sexuality?

I wasn't always a sexual free spirit. Though I experienced sensual feelings when I approached puberty, and ballet practice with my cute neighbor Sandy turned into delicious explorations of each other's bodies—nongenital but very exciting—I remained a virgin until I got serious with my first boyfriend at the age of eighteen, and didn't have my first orgasm until I was nineteen (courtesy of the liberating information about clitorises and orgasms in the very first edition of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*). But this was the early 1970s, and the sexual revolution was in full bloom, as was I. I was also active in the women's lib movement, as it was called then, and contrary to later misrepresentations, the women's movement at that time embraced sexual freedom and promoted a woman's right to a healthy, fulfilling sex life.

Many contradictions emerged during that period of the women's movement. Though a healthy sex life for women was eagerly embraced, some believed that choosing a man for that great sex life was akin to sleeping with the enemy. I began to feel that that anger and finger pointing was replacing the wonderful feelings of purpose and camaraderie that I had experienced with my feminist sisters. At the same time, I was losing interest in my college studies, and my native New York was feeling grimy and unwelcoming. So I threw a few things into a backpack and left for the sunny freewheeling lifestyle of San Francisco. It was there that my foray into the world of commercial sex began.

I cast off my Sisterhood is Powerful t-shirts, and began hangin' out with the freaks, hippies, and drag queens of San Francisco. Boundless creativity and unlimited self-expression flourished in this magical town that gave birth to the peace and love movement. Vintage thrift shop clothes from the 1940s and 1950s and bright red lipstick replaced the drab gray-brown uniforms of the political movement I had left behind. I fell in with a wild theatrical crowd, from the originators of the infamous Cockettes, an outrageous performance troupe fueled by glitter and hallucinogens that grew out of the gay rights movement, to their offspring, the Angels of Light. It was with the Angels of Light that I made my San

Francisco debut as “The Little Tomato,” covered in red and green glitter and singing an a cappella jazz ditty I wrote by the same name, which I became known for. This was also when I took on the name, Candida Royale, Candida being the Latin derivative of my birth name, Candice, and Royale, well, it just rolled off my tongue and I liked it. I thought it sounded like a rich French dessert.

As the daughter of a professional jazz drummer, singing jazz came naturally to me, and my love for scatting led many to describe me as “the little white Ella Fitzgerald”—quite an honor! I performed in a number of a cappella jazz groups and avant-garde theater troupes, as well as my own jazz combo. But we shunned materialism in those days. I made a little money from some of my jazz gigs and occasional sales of my art, but we mostly performed for free. We felt that it was more important to perform for the love of it and to bring free theater to the masses than to worry about making money. One small problem: I still had to pay my rent. And here, finally, is where porn comes in.

Looking for money to support my art habit, I answered an ad for nude modeling. Although I was shy about being naked in front of others—a fact that surprises people since many assume performers are exhibitionists by nature—I had drawn countless nude models in my many life-drawing classes, so I wasn’t shocked by the notion. What *did* shock me was when the agent asked me if I would be interested in being in a porn movie. Having never even seen one, I stormed out of his office in a huff. But my musician boyfriend at the time thought it sounded like a great way to make money, and he immediately got a lead role in an Anthony Spinelli movie called *Cry for Cindy*. Anthony Spinelli, at that time, was considered one of the best directors of the genre. His work was slick and professional and he was a very nice person to work for. I decided to go to the film set to see for myself what it was like.

Contrary to my preconceived notions of porn sets filled with pathetic drug addicts and creeps with cameras, I found a large professional crew (many Hollywood crew people moonlighted on porn sets for extra money), scripts, and a very attractive cast. I reasoned that if people made love behind closed doors and there was nothing wrong with sex, then what could be wrong with performing sexually for others to view and enjoy in privacy? It was, after all, the time of “free love” and everyone was experimenting and taking part in group sex; why not hook up with a good-looking guy or girl and have it captured on film? And get paid for it to boot.

The first thing I did was perform in a couple of loops to see if I could handle having sex in front of a camera and crew. Many of the major porn

stars did these for extra cash on the side but never admitted to it. Lacking any pretense of real moviemaking, loops were created to fill the peep-show booths where guys feed quarters into slots to watch a couple of people do the old "pizza guy delivers and so does she" bit. My first foray into loops wasn't exactly pleasurable, but at least I felt that I could do it. From there I began the audition rounds where you actually had to read lines from a script to get a role. In those days feature films shot on 16 or 35 mm were the norm and the ability to act was a plus.

In time I gained a reputation for being a skilled and reliable actress who could be counted on to come to the set knowing my lines and deliver a good scene. For some reason I seemed to get typecast as either the wisecracking rabble-rouser and gang leader, as in *Ball Game*, an X-rated girls' prison movie directed by Anne Perry, one of the few early female porn directors, or my favorite, the totally silly *Hot & Saucy Pizza Girls*, featuring the notorious John Holmes. I was the snooty rich wife who withheld sex from her poor horny hubby in *Hot Racquettes* and *Delicious*. One of my all-time favorite adult films that I was featured in was Chuck Vincent's *Fascination*, a hilarious romp starring a cute, young Ron Jeremy as a neurotic Jewish guy with an over-protective mother, who acquires a bachelor pad to attract girls. The film featured an amazing cast of talented and funny actresses including Samantha Fox, Merle Michaels, and Marlene Willoughby. I also loved *Blue Magic*, a beautiful period piece that I wrote and starred in, which was produced by my then-new husband, Per Sjöstedt. This was also my swan song to porn . . . that is, porn in *front* of the camera. I hadn't known then that my expanded role as scriptwriter anticipated things to come.

It was 1980, and after about twenty-five movies in five years, I was ready to abandon porn stardom. Monogamous by nature, I was in love with my new husband and didn't want to be sexual with other men. I also felt the easy money was keeping me from pursuing other personal career goals that had more long-term potential. Taking time to consider what I'd like to do next, I kept busy earning a living writing for a number of men's magazines like *High Society*, *Swank*, and *Cheri*. During this time, I began to feel a growing uneasiness about my time spent in porn films. I felt it was perfectly fine to perform sexually for others to view and enjoy, but I often felt awkward and uncertain about admitting to my unusual vocation to anyone outside my artists, freaks, and merrymaking crowd. Looking to resolve this and other issues in my life, I found an amazing woman, a social worker, who at one time had been a sex worker. She was someone I felt wouldn't judge me.

In order to understand and come to terms with the choices I had

made, I had to try to separate my own feelings about pornography from what society says about it. I had been brought up to think for myself, but societal and religious influences have a way of permeating our thoughts so that it becomes difficult to decipher what we think as opposed to what we've been told to think. As part of this reflective process I explored everything from early erotic art, from the sexually explicit frescoes of ancient Pompeii and the exquisite Japanese erotic art known as shunga, to twentieth-century smokers, blue movies, peep shows, amateur porn, and the big-budget, star-studded features of the "golden age" of porn. When I also examined all the erotic fiction and manuals for newlyweds, from early Japanese Pillow Books and the still popular *Kama Sutra* to the works of Anaïs Nin and the Marquis de Sade, it became clear that people have always been curious about what sex looks like and how to do it, from those who created it to those who consumed it. I concluded that there was nothing wrong with erotica or adult entertainment; we have a natural curiosity shared by our earliest ancestors. But one thing was glaringly absent from contemporary pornography: a female vision or point of view. Porn images and movies have changed remarkably little from the formulas of the early stag films to the films of the "golden age" and still today. Though 1970s culture had changed enough to allow women to pursue active sex lives without the sanction of marriage, porn films still focused mainly on male pleasure, with its laughable depiction of a woman in the throes of ecstasy as her male partner cums on her face, the *de rigueur* money shot.

Even if there was a lot of porn that I didn't much like, I felt it was basically benign. But I still had to confront my feelings of having betrayed my sisters in the movement. On numerous occasions I'd been challenged about the contradiction of being an active feminist who also performed in porn movies, as if one naturally precluded the other. I could never come up with a satisfactory answer, other than to say it was my body to do with what I wanted. But most people still disapproved of porn and I had to admit that, despite my years spent giddily flying in the face of convention, I did care about what others thought of me. I wished I didn't, but there was no use in lying to myself. So why, with all the training and education I had under my belt, would I choose to do work that is shunned by most of society and would ultimately limit my future career options? (Don't let the moderate crossover success of Tracy Lords or even Sasha Grey fool you into thinking the taboo has been lifted: as I always point out, we still live in a culture that avidly consumes porn while judging and marginalizing the women who perform in it.) It's true that many of the women who enter the field of sex work do it for less than positive

reasons, such as to act out feelings of worthlessness or self-loathing. But there are also many women who do it because they enjoy sex and like the idea of having sex for money, or at least find it far less oppressive and more lucrative than some of their other options. My reasons contained elements of each of these scenarios. I found being in porn movies easier than giving all my time to a job I had no interest in. And I also began to understand the deeper psychological reasons that led me to porn. I believed that my natural gifts weren't enough to gain my estranged father's love and approval. Steeped in a culture that conveys to young girls that our greatest asset is our desirability, I came to the conclusion that my sexuality was the way to fulfill my needs. And what better way to secure the love and approval I so longed for than becoming a sought-after porn star?

My time in counseling was bringing me the peace and self-acceptance I longed for. But while I thought my introspective journey would bring closure to the porn chapter of my life, it launched me more deeply into the world of porn than I could have ever imagined. As I was gaining the clarity and self-compassion I needed to move on with my life, a certain curiosity began to take over. I found myself wondering what porn movies that appealed to women might look like. I also began to feel a desire to give something back to women after performing in male-identified porn that left women out. So why not create adult films that deliver useful information about sex and that represent women's desire? After all, until recently, porn had been for many people their only source of sexual information. I began to see its potential as a way of educating while entertaining its viewers, thus giving back to both women and couples who sought to better understand each other's needs.

By 1983, several cultural events had come together to create the perfect moment for this concept to flourish. The women's movement had given women permission to explore their sexuality. They were curious to view sexy movies, but the majority of women were not comfortable with what they found in existing porn. As it turned out, many men, too, were also looking for something different, and they wanted to find movies their partners might enjoy. At the same time cable TV and the VCR came onto the market and suddenly there was a way to view movies in the privacy of your home. Now women could sneak a peek in the safety of their own domains and couples could enjoy them privately, rather than sitting among questionable guys in raincoats, in dark seedy theaters with sticky floors. Now all they needed were the movies—and that's where I came in.

I welcomed the challenge of creating explicit erotica that was excit-

ing, skillfully done, and above all, female positive. I was convinced there was a commercial market for this and I was determined to prove it. As an added incentive, any hope of putting Candida Royalle to rest was lost once porn from the 1970s became available on video and cable TV. Stepping behind the camera allowed me to create movies that I felt proud to be associated with. It was my way of giving something back while reclaiming my name, and helping women feel more comfortable with their sexuality. We still lived in a world where “good girls don’t,” where female characters with strong, active sex drives in movies and on TV had to be punished or show retribution for their sins. I believed adult entertainment could be a tool for sexual knowledge and empowerment for women, and could help men understand how women feel and what they want.

I knew that the most important element that had to change was the erotic depiction. I wasn’t interested in creating the typical soap opera story line most producers thought women wanted, and then cutting to the usual formulaic sex once it was time for a sex scene. Enter my first business partner, Lauren Neimi, a talented photographer with a great idea: erotic rock videos from a female perspective. MTV was all the rage then, and Lauren had come to New York looking for backers. A friend of mine overheard her pitching her idea and suggested she talk to me. I thought it was the perfect solution. My husband’s father was a successful producer and distributor in Europe who had invested in several big-budget American erotic features, and had mentioned a few times that he thought I would make a good director, so upon hearing our concept he offered to finance it. As all the pieces fell remarkably into place with an ease that felt predetermined by fate, I gave up the notion of leaving Candida Royalle behind and surrendered to what seemed to be my calling.

In early 1984 Lauren and I created Femme Productions. We watched a variety of porn and erotica to help us determine how we would make our work different and more female-oriented. First, we agreed the sex would be explicit. We weren’t interested in overly graphic shots of giant genitalia or what we called the “gynecological close-up,” but we also weren’t interested in promoting the idea that genitals are ugly and must be hidden from view. As would be confirmed by letters we received, viewers wanted to see it all, but they wanted to see it done with taste and subtlety rather than having it rubbed in their face. Second, the almighty money shot had to go. We figured that with 99.9 percent of all porn ending every scene with a cum shot, it was time that people had an alternative. We preferred to show people’s faces while climaxing, or their hands gripping, or their bodies or butts contracting. And third, the porn for-

mula had to go. We wanted to throw it out and start fresh, to focus less on genitalia and more on sensuality. We wanted to portray a sense of connectedness, tenderness, communication, passion, excitement, and longing. We wanted to portray women with real bodies, of all ages and types, who our female viewers could relate to and identify with, and men who seemed to care about their partners, who wanted to please and satisfy them.

On a technical level, we had to create a whole new way of shooting. In traditional porn, it looks mechanical because it *is* mechanical. You're basically shooting from a checklist and you've got to get plenty of footage of each type of sex act, from all the standard angles, to fulfill your obligations to your distributor. So you might set up the lights and cameras to shoot about twenty minutes worth of fellatio from one angle, and then stop and reset the lights and cameras to shoot it from another angle, and so on. Clearly this leaves little room for spontaneity and makes the work of the actor much tougher as he attempts to maintain his erection while the actress does her best to keep him excited during all this stop-and-go setup for hours on end.

Lauren and I employed a more cinema vérité style of shooting where very little was predetermined, other than discussing with the performers what sorts of things we thought their characters might do and the sorts of things we'd like to see. We allowed them to bring something of themselves to the scene while staying in character, even if it was a simple fantasy vignette, as in our early work. Allowing them to have a say about whom they worked with, our first choice being real couples, insured a more authentic sense of desire. At the same time we allowed our camera people free rein to move around the lovers unrestricted by pre-set angles and positions, catching moments as they happened.

Whether it was me or Lauren directing, we would try to sit close enough to both the actors and the camera person(s) to be able to whisper direction to them while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. Over time, as I incorporated more detailed story lines that necessitated more staging and storyboarding, I still maintained the same approach to filming the erotic scenes. When it worked, what resulted was an intimacy between the actors, the person behind the camera, and the director, that led to a feeling of pure magic. You just knew when you had created something special, something that would touch people on a deep, erotic level. It didn't always turn out that way, but I felt a great sense of joy and accomplishment when it did.

As Lauren and I experimented and worked out this new style of making porn in the early stages of *Femme*, it seemed so easy to us that we

marveled over the fact that no one else had thought to do this. Of course, no one else had because the idea of a women's or couples' market for porn was completely unheard of. My father-in-law's offer to finance our concept had come with a condition: I had to first find a distributor. This turned out to be our biggest challenge. When most of the major adult companies patted me on the head and informed me that there was no such market—"this is a boy's club," said one of them—that just made me even more determined. I knew they were wrong. I finally got one of the better-known companies, VCA Pictures, to agree to distribute our movies, and with little marketing and promotion, our first three Femme videos, *Femme* (1984), *Urban Heat* (1984), and *Christine's Secret* (1986), were met with overwhelming enthusiasm and commercial success.

After our first year, Lauren moved on to pursue other projects and I continued on with Femme. In 1986, my husband and I started Femme Distribution, negotiated with VCA to get back our first three titles, and took on the domestic and international distribution of the Femme line. We produced five more titles, including the three-volume Star Director Series, in which I invited four other close friends who had been adult film stars—Annie Sprinkle, Gloria Leonard, Veronica Vera, and Veronica Hart—to write and direct their own short stories. In the meantime, to reach the demographic I was targeting without having to spend big advertising dollars, I put to use what I learned in my college public-speaking course and became the spokesperson for Femme. I knew the media would eat up a story about a former porn star who dared to take on the male-dominated porn industry, and it didn't hurt that I wasn't at all what they expected to find when they came to interview me. Once we went into distribution I moved out of my home office and into a loft in the up-and-coming, hip SoHo area of Manhattan, and instead of being greeted by a blond, buxom nymphet from Porn Valley, they were welcomed by a spiky salt-and-pepper-haired woman who was very New York. I had my detractors, but most members of the press got what I was trying to do and appreciated the inroads I was making.

Over time Femme had garnered an impressive media presence that included *Time*, *Glamour*, the *New York Times*, *Times of London*, and countless more publications and appearances on nearly every major TV show including *The Phil Donahue Show*, where I, a nervous newbie in political debate, successfully squared off with Catherine MacKinnon. I had succeeded in creating enough demand for my line that retailers were forced to stock it if they wanted to get in on the new and growing women's and couples' market.

In 1988 my husband and I separated, and I began to oversee both

production and distribution. After a few years, I was exhausted and realized I couldn't be both the creative director and the distributor. In 1995 I approached PHE, Inc./Adam and Eve, a company owned by Phil Harvey, who was known for his political and philanthropic work, and after a year of negotiating, the company started their own wholesale distribution division with my *Femme* line and agreed to finance my work. Adding ten more features to my line, including *AfroDite Superstar* (2006), the first to fall under my multiethnic line, "Femme Chocolat," *Femme* now boasts a line of eighteen titles. My latest endeavor has been to launch the work of other women erotic film directors whose visions are new and innovative.

Perhaps my greatest pride comes from the many letters and emails I have received from men and women over the years thanking me for creating adult movies that made them feel good about sex and provided a much needed boost to a long-term marriage burdened by the demands of children and the challenges of busy lives. Second to that is having been embraced by the sexology field and the many marriage and sex counselors who feel comfortable suggesting my work to women and couples they think it would help. In 1988 Dr. Sandra Cole, who was at that time president of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT), asked me to speak at their annual national conference. In 1992 they screened my fourth movie, *Three Daughters*, a coming-of-age story that includes a scene of the parents' sexual rediscovery. AASECT endorsed it for "promoting positive sexual role-modeling."

So can porn coexist with the principles of feminism? Was I continuing to betray my sisters? Or had I helped to create an environment in which women could express their own unique sexual visions on film and video? Early on, the press began to label me a "feminist pornographer," an oxymoron to some, an attention-getting headline for others. I never set out to make "feminist" movies—"humanist" might be more accurate—and I've always hated the P-word. For me, "pornography" conjured up images of plastic women mechanically performing sex on men who were mostly unattractive, and sex that was devoid of feeling, boring at best, repulsive at worst. Erotica sounded pretentious and ambiguous. But there is no other word that grabs people's attention the way the P-word does. It made people aware of my work but it didn't necessarily help me reach the market I sought. In the 1980s and even much of the 1990s, just the mention of porn would turn most women off. Now "porn" is the new, hip, updated word for pornography. It has come to mean something that's daring, defiant. Just as women disempowered the "slut" epithet which was long used to silence those who might want to pursue as active a sex life as some men do, I understand that today's

young women have claimed the word “porn” to rebel against the notion that women only want soft, genteel erotica.

In the early 1990s, a male journalist coined the term, “do-me feminism” to describe the growing number of young women who were claiming their right to make and enjoy porn. But it’s only in the new century that I’ve seen a noticeable increase in porn movies directed by women. It’s as if it took an entire generation before women felt brave enough to step behind the blue camera, whether for commercial sale or to post on the Internet. But is it “feminist” simply because it’s made by a woman? When I watch porn directed by a woman I’m hoping to see something different, innovative, something that speaks to me as a woman. All too often I find myself disappointed by what turns out to be the same lineup of sex scenes containing the usual sex acts, sometimes more extreme, following the same old formula and ending in the almighty money shot. Rather than creating a new vision, it seems many of today’s young female directors, often working under the tutelage of the big porn distributors, seek only to prove that they can be even nastier than their male predecessors. And it’s not so much the type of sex that offends me, it’s the crude in-your-face depiction that seems more interested in shock value than anything female viewers might enjoy. Do they really think that most women are going to be turned on by seeing a woman screwed in every orifice by a bunch of seedy guys who finally relieve themselves on her face? And if they’re not concerned with what women want, should it then be considered feminist?

When the women’s movement fought for a woman’s right to a fulfilling sex life, it meant that men had better start learning about what turns us on and gets us off. We empowered each other through books and consciousness-raising to learn about our bodies and our needs, without shame and guilt, and to expect nothing less than a respectful partner who cared about how we felt and would stop at nothing to please us.

I wish I could say that my greatest source of pride is the impact my work has had on the enormous adult industry, but that is not the case. Other than a handful of women whose work stands above the rest, I believe that like many social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, “women’s porn” became co-opted by mass media, stripped of its original intent, and regurgitated by the still male-dominated porn industry, which wallows in low-brow shock entertainment for the masses. “Feminist porn” is not dead, but it has a long way to go before it can take its rightful place as a force of change.

If women don’t create their own erotic visions, their own sexual language, men will continue to do it for us and we’ll never fully understand

our own unique sexual nature. Women have so much to contribute to what constitutes sex or lovemaking. Our sexuality is more complex, more nuanced. We bring elements of unpredictability to lovemaking. If men can teach us to be more open, we can teach them to be more subtle, to take their time, and to luxuriate in every moment as it evolves. It's time we women were encouraged to nurture and explore our still largely untapped sexual nature. I'm not calling for a softer, gentler porn. I like down and dirty sex as much as anyone, and I've tried to depict a range of fantasies in my work. But I've always tried to do it with a sense of respect and dignity. I want women to feel good about themselves after they watch my movies. Maybe some of the women whose work I am critical of don't care about reaching women; perhaps that's not their agenda at all. What bothers me is the media identifying their work as feminist when it has nothing to do with speaking for women and advancing the principles of feminism. And it saddens me that so many young female directors are passing up the opportunity to make a difference.

I challenge young women who are fortunate enough to have the means to produce and direct erotic cinema to have the courage to explore what is uniquely theirs rather than reenacting what is someone else's. To create a vision that inspires other women, that helps them feel comfortable with their sexuality, that gives women permission to experiment and find their own voice. I believe this is both feminist and humanist. It serves to make all our lives better, and isn't that ultimately what we want?

My Decadent Decade: Ten Years of Making and Debating Porn for Women



MS. NAUGHTY

Ms. Naughty (a.k.a. Louise Lush) is a writer, editor, blogger, entrepreneur, and filmmaker with a passion for women's erotica. She jointly runs ForTheGirls.com, an adult paysite, along with numerous other erotic sites aimed at straight women. Her erotic fiction has appeared in *Best Women's Erotica* and her erotic short films have screened at numerous international film festivals, with three nominated for Feminist Porn Awards. She lives with her husband in a small Australian town, surrounded by fundamentalist Christians.

I still remember the day I bought my first porn magazine. It was 1993, I was twenty, and I was safely two hundred and fifty miles away from my hometown. I walked into the newsstand and, stomach churning, purchased *Australian Women's Forum* (AWF), the new and exciting magazine that featured photos of naked men. The cashier didn't give me a brown paper bag, so I was forced to roll it up and make a dash for the car.

I took it back to the house and devoured the contents, loving the fact that this magazine contained no fashion or diets, only sex and feminism. Especially thrilling was the letters section, rife with steamy and sometimes embarrassing real-life stories of sex. My then-boyfriend (now husband) and I always had fantastic sex after I bought AWF.

It wasn't the first porn I'd encountered, of course. As a kid I'd been fascinated by my father's badly hidden *Penthouse* and *Mayfair* magazines. They were deliciously naughty, yet confusing. I had no idea what an orgasm or cum was, and I had never seen a single penis. Still, I became certain of two things. First, I liked porn. It was rude. I knew I shouldn't look at it; I would get into serious trouble if I were caught. But I liked it nonetheless. Second, I became certain that black suspenders and stockings were the epitome of sexy. I couldn't wait to wear them when I grew up.

Buying AWF was the first time I openly embraced my love of porn. After years of furtive glimpses and stolen moments, I finally stepped up

and claimed it for myself. Even though I was terrified that first time, I was able to find the courage to buy it because *AWF* was *different*. It wasn't a dirty men's magazine hidden at the back of the shop. Instead, it was sassy, bold, and unapologetic.

It was *feminist*.

Buying *AWF* that day ultimately changed my life. It led to my career as a feminist pornographer.

I set out to create porn for women.¹ I wanted to replicate the positive, empowered, female-friendly philosophy that I had seen in *AWF*. I wanted to create porn that I would enjoy, and I wanted to share that porn with other horny women.

That wasn't my only motivation, of course. I was in it to make money, just like everyone else. Porn was a rich seam in 2000, a gold mine offering easy cash and good times to anyone willing to learn the ropes. Nonetheless, I opted for the more obscure and less profitable option of catering to straight women—at that stage, an unknown and dismissed market.

The thing was, I liked porn but I really didn't like how most of it was marketed. I hated the way it ignored me as a viewer. It was always aimed at men and spoke only to them. It concentrated on sex acts that men liked and didn't seem to care about giving an equal share of the pleasure to the woman. The photos and movies cut the men out of the frame, concentrating only on the woman's body. The guys were often unattractive and seemed creepy or obnoxious. There was little romance, foreplay, or cunnilingus—the things that I wanted to see. The women always kept their shoes on and looked directly at the camera as they were being fucked. The scenes almost always ended with a facial “pop shot” and I didn't want to see that—I thought it was degrading and also kind of stupid. The woman would often kneel with a slightly pained expression on her face, trying to look adoringly up at the man while he squirted semen in her eye. The camera never showed the man's face during orgasm, which—to me—was a travesty. Men's faces are beautiful at that moment.

Put simply, I liked porn but I also didn't like it—a reaction that I knew other women experienced as well. I wanted to change that. I wanted to make porn *better*. I still do.

For me, making porn for women was a feminist act. I didn't buy into the prevailing Dworkinesque wisdom that all porn was evil and inherently woman-hating because that philosophy didn't reflect how I personally felt about it. I knew porn wasn't perfect but that didn't mean I had to dismiss it completely. Surely, I reasoned, it would be better to change it, to make it more positive and include a woman's perspective in the pro-

cess. If women had their own porn that acknowledged their experiences and desires, surely the scales would be evened up a little. To me, making my own porn was a positive solution to a difficult question.

I began by licensing photos from other adult photographers and putting them on small sites that linked to pay sites with affiliate programs. It was far cheaper and easier to buy existing photos than to try and make my own (especially given the censorship laws in Australia). I'd browse through photo sets of naked men that were intended for a gay audience and simply choose the guys I liked the look of, editing out the "open bum" shots and any pictures that looked stereotypically "gay." I was trying to sell a fantasy of a good-looking, straight (and therefore attainable) nude guy. In the end, though, it didn't really matter if they were actually gay or not, as long as they were good-looking.

And *hard*. Being able to see erections was so important because they'd been hidden from view for so long. The guys in *AWF* were flaccid in compliance with censorship laws. Indeed, the editor once told me they used a protractor to measure the "angle of the dangle" to ensure the magazine got past inspection. The Internet was different. It offered a beautiful level of freedom and there were no government rules declaring a hard cock to be "obscene." To me, being able to publish photos of erections was a subversive, feminist act. Male nudity was still rarely seen in mainstream films and television, though female nudity was common. The penis was a no-go area, a last bastion of secrecy, a final preserve of male power. The Internet enabled me to pull down the curtain and show the cock in all its glory.

When it came to photos of sex (and in this case, we're talking about heterosexual couples), I went looking for images that turned me on. I often opted for photo sets that had more kissing, eye contact, and cunnilingus or ones that focused on both partners equally and didn't have the woman looking at the camera. I tried to find images that showed female pleasure and realistic-looking sex (as opposed to the deliberately over-the-top, "porny" gonzo style with uncomfortable positions). These were few and far between and I would spend days trawling through content sites trying to find just the right set.

I became part of an online community of mostly American webmasters who were making and promoting porn for a living. We'd get together on message boards and Internet relay chat channels and discuss new ideas and the best way to market our porn. The community was predominantly male and often rather obnoxious and sexist. Being a female webmaster was unusual; trying to also promote porn to women was often considered to be a waste of time.

Still, there were a few of us and we got together on our own board, the Women's Erotica Network (WEN), made up of about twenty people. There we discussed our own particular "niche" and the best ways to promote our product, along with the more philosophical questions about what we were doing.

Everyone at WEN was a believer in porn for women. We were all capitalists, yes, but we wanted to change the world, too. There was much about porn that we didn't like, much that we wanted to do differently. We didn't always agree with each other but that was part of the fun.

We were essentially making up the concept of porn for women as we went along. There wasn't much to go on; we really only had the films of Candida Royalle and the male centerfolds of *Playgirl* as a guide, as well as our own ideas of what was sexy. We often pondered the question of "what women want" and agreed that there wasn't any one thing that all women desired. We also knew that women were likely to have different tastes on different days.

Still, we knew what *sold*. Heterosexual couples porn, both romantic and "tasteful hardcore" did well, as did good-looking naked men and erotic fiction. These three types of content eventually solidified into the gold standard of porn for women and what many people associate with it.

That's not to say it was the whole story. We diversified in our own ways; I had small sites featuring BDSM, female domination, male-male-female bisexual fantasies, costume porn, anal and pegging, as well as sites about kissing and cunnilingus. I remember one discussion where we looked forward to the day when women's porn had as many "niches" (fetishes) as mainstream porn. The problem was, there were very few of us making it and not a lot of support for our vision within the wider adult community. There were many times we'd discuss porn for women on the major adult message boards and be dismissed out of hand. "Women don't buy porn," was the usual response. "Women aren't visual."

I've heard that "women aren't visual" line countless times over the decade. It's an idea that originated with Dr. Alfred Kinsey's 1950s research and has become embedded in our culture as a biological truth. More current research has shown just how wrong Kinsey was on this point. Dr. Michael Bailey's oft-quoted study performed at Northwestern University in 2001 found that women were aroused by a wide variety of erotic images, as opposed to men who were more focused on erotic imagery aligned with their particular sexual orientation.² In 2004, researchers from the Stanford University School of Medicine found that women became fully aroused within two minutes of watching a sexually explicit

film—faster than the average man.³ Similarly, in 2006, researchers at McGill University used thermal imaging to measure the arousal rates of both men and women when watching adult films. They concluded that there was no difference between men and women in the time it took to become aroused.⁴

I knew women were turned on by porn and I had the statistics to prove it. Critics asked me what porn for women looked like. I argued repeatedly that facial cum shots didn't appeal to women; women wanted more romance, kissing, intimacy, and realism. I must admit I became prescriptive at times about what kind of content constituted women's porn. It seemed easier to just talk about naked men and sensual couples than to get into philosophical discussions about "what women want." Even so, I often did my best to explain that porn for women was about the audience and the perspective, not the sex acts involved. In 2003, I wrote, "My definition of good porn for women involves depictions of sex where the woman's pleasure is paramount. It has to be about HER experience of sex, HER pleasure, and HER orgasm. Everything else is really just window dressing."

The research conducted in 1994 by Ellen Laan at the University of Amsterdam was especially useful in summing up why I was making porn for women. Laan studied whether women's subjective responses to porn were different to their physical reactions, by showing her subjects different types of porn, including the female-friendly film *Urban Heat* by Candida Royalle. She found that while their physical arousal was constant, "subjective experience of sexual arousal was significantly higher during the woman-made film. The man-made film evoked more feelings of shame, guilt, and aversion."⁵ I wanted to offer the good stuff without all the shame, guilt, and aversion.

In 2003, I teamed up with fellow webmistress Jane and we started our own subscription site, ForTheGirls.com. I gathered all the stories and articles I'd written and pooled my collection of photos with Jane's. Our site was created as a one-stop-shop for straight women who wanted to enjoy erotic content in a female-friendly space. We followed the successful formula of hot guys mixed with hetero couples and a bit of erotic variety. Plus, we offered a wide variety of reading material that included feature articles, interviews, reviews, advice, and erotic fiction so our subscribers could say they "only joined for the articles." The site has grown steadily since then.

In 2004, I set up a linklist and began to write a blog under the pseudonym Ms. Naughty to chronicle new developments in women's porn, including new sites, books, magazines, and films that catered to women.

Filmmakers like Estelle Joseph, Erika Lust, and Petra Joy created their first films made specifically for women, adding to the genre created by Candida Royalle, Marianna Beck, Tristan Taormino, and Maria Beatty. There was an increasing number of adult sites for straight women including eight major pay sites. The indie magazine *Sweet Action* was launched to much fanfare, and a group of women were developing a women's erotic cable channel called Inpulse. It seemed that I was part of something big, something that would change the face of porn, and that change was just around the corner.

The reality wasn't so fabulous. On the whole, the adult industry still didn't accept the idea that women made up anything other than a miniscule market.

And yet the statistics said otherwise. In 2001, an MSNBC survey found one in eight women were using their work computers to access porn.⁶ In 2003, Nielsen NetRatings reported that around 28 percent of all porn users were female.⁷ A survey by *Today's Christian Woman* online magazine that same year revealed that 34 percent of their (fine, upstanding, Christian) female readers had intentionally indulged in porn. In 2007, Nielsen reported that one in three Australian women used porn in the first three months of that year⁸ and that thirteen million American women had used porn in a single month.⁹

During my various discussions on message boards I encountered female webmasters who objected to the concept of porn for women. "Not all women like emotional bullshit," wrote one webmistress named Jackie. "I am just as tough as any guy, I'll watch cum-fuck-slut movies and anal gaping and gangbangs and whatever else is out there all day long. I don't need separate porn made for me."

My original response to that particular critique of women's porn was one of frustration. "If you like that stuff, good for you. There's a ton of it out there, go and enjoy it. But we're trying to make something for women who don't like that kind of porn. Why are you denying them that?"

That's what I was originally trying to do: make porn for women like me, women who weren't into the circus acts, clichés, stupidity, and misogyny that were common in most mainstream porn. I wanted to make something different, something inclusive. And I thought a lot of women felt the same way. Hell, the sales indicated as much.

But here's the thing. I admit I was only looking at part of the picture.

Over the course of many online conversations and blog posts, I've thrashed out the nebulous issue of porn for women with others and done my best to be open to ideas and criticism.

I've seen Jackie's complaint repeated many times since those early

days and I acknowledge that it's a legitimate point. Porn for women is a problematic phrase because it's so broad and implies that there is one form of porn that appeals to all women. This is wrong, of course. Women's erotic tastes are just as expansive and diverse as men's.

For some, the term has also become prescriptive. Plenty have concluded that it only equals "soft" romantic porn and they find this objectionable because—for them, at least—it embodies the presumption that women are too weak to be able to handle the "hard stuff."

There's also the criticism that porn for women is a nonsense phrase because it makes assumptions about women themselves—primarily that they are heterosexual, cisgender, white, and middle class. The concept of creating porn from a female perspective is difficult because not all female perspectives are the same. The sexual experiences of queer, lesbian, and trans women don't necessarily fit into the porn for women box, at least in terms of how it's come to be popularly understood.

As someone who has been a champion of porn for women for over twelve years, I originally found it hard to acknowledge the truth of this criticism. I am still keen to defend the phrase because it means so much to me; it signifies my desire and motivation to create a better kind of porn for women like myself who aren't represented by mainstream porn. And yet I know that it doesn't sit right with many people. It's problematic and, in some cases, off-putting. It's not necessarily the best label for adult material that seeks to cater to women.

Should we replace the phrase "porn for women"? And if so, with what do we replace it?

Before we go there, perhaps we should ask if we still even *need* to cater to women separately. It is 2013, after all. Porn is ubiquitous on the Internet and easily accessible, catering to every imaginable fetish and fantasy. An entire generation of young women has grown up with sexually explicit material available at the touch of a button; for them, a nervous trip into a store to physically buy a dirty magazine is a sepia-toned tale of yesterday. Their tastes have probably been shaped by the porn they've seen; perhaps they don't feel the "shame, guilt, and aversion" of Ellen Laan's 1994 research subjects. There are plenty of female porn consumers who are perfectly happy with what's out there already.

And yet today's pornography is still not particularly female-friendly. The majority of it is still aimed primarily at heterosexual or gay men; the language still speaks to them and male perspectives and male paths to pleasure still get the most priority. Sexist and racist attitudes and language are par for the course in many mainstream films and websites. There is also ongoing concern about the ethical production of porn

and whether the performers are paid and treated well. This latter issue is something that I've seen women identify as a problem that prevents them from enjoying porn.

So I think the need still exists to identify adult material that women can feel comfortable with, that doesn't seek to exclude them, or make them feel bad when they consume it.

Indeed, I should point out here that the desire to see positive, ethical porn is not exclusively a female concern. Plenty of men want to see it too (and this is another problem with the phrase, "porn for women").

So, if we still want to identify this positive, inclusive type of porn, what is the ideal label for it?

This is a problem for horny straight women. Even today, it can be difficult to source erotic material that fits the bill. Straight women complain that they can't find good porn. Women are still on the outside. The box covers of straight adult DVDs all feature photos of women, not men. A search of "porn" still brings up hundreds of mainstream websites, most of which talk about "shooting your load" and "your cock" rather than "your clit." The AVN awards have an oral sex category that only ever features films about blowjobs. The vast majority of hetero adult films still focus the camera on the woman and cut the man out of the frame. And most of them finish with a male orgasm, often without bothering to feature a female orgasm.

This is why I still use the term "porn for women"—even if it is stereotypical, assumptive, problematic, and just plain wrong to some. I still use it because it's recognizable and it helps horny women find me on the Internet.

If a woman types the phrase into Google, I can offer them a variety of websites including my blog and linklist or my website Porn Movies for Women or my alternative list Quirky Sex. And then I try to help them to find what they want—be it romantic heterosexual sex or kinky Japanese bondage or fucking machines or Tristan Taormino's latest rough sex film. What I offer may not necessarily be perfect for that surfer, but hopefully she'll be a bit closer to finding what she wants.

And if they happen to want ForTheGirls.com or my other subscription websites or my short films, that's good too. I am an evil capitalist pornographer, after all.

Capitalism does play an important part in all this. While erotic material may be made purely for artistic reasons, porn is mostly made for profit. Market forces do come into play and tend to shape what kind of material is produced. Given that women still only make up one third of the market, porn still focuses on male consumers. And when it comes

to porn aimed at straight women, there's still a demand for what is derided as "stereotypical" content. I'm still making a good living offering my particular brand of women's porn that includes what Jackie called "emotional bullshit." I still like it and I know that plenty of other straight women—and men—do too.

Perhaps a day is coming when pornography as a whole moves into better territory, when depictions of sex don't automatically come loaded with sexism or racism or nonsense stereotypes or negativity, as happens so often now. I'm looking forward to that day. It's what I was hoping for when I started. When that happens, distinctions such as "porn for women" or "feminist porn" may well and truly be irrelevant because all genders, sexualities, experiences, perspectives, fetishes, and desires will have an equal place at the table.

In the meantime, I'll continue to make my own kind of porn, a single female voice offering my own version of erotica, reflecting my own tastes and aesthetic vision. It won't appeal to everyone but it will hopefully make a few people horny and happy.

At its heart, I think that is ultimately what feminist porn is all about.

Notes

1. This essay makes regular use of the word "women" and most often I am talking about heterosexual cisgender women who have always been my target market.

2. Jaclyn Bertner and Matt Donnelly, "Someone's Getting Turned on For Science," *Daily Northwestern*, November 29, 2001, <http://www.dailynorthwestern.com/daily/issues/2001/11/29/nyou/m-bailey.shtml>.

3. Mary Lake Polan et al., "Female Sexual Arousal: A Behavioral Analysis," *Fertility and Sterility* 80, no. 6 (December 2003): 1480–87.

4. Tuuli M. Kukkonen et al., "Thermography as a Physiological Measure of Sexual Arousal in Both Men and Women," *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 4, no. 1 (January 2007): 93.

5. Ellen Laan et al., "Women's Sexual and Emotional Responses to Male- and Female-Produced Erotica," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 23, no. 2 (1994): 153–69.

6. "MSNBC Cybersex Survey 2000," MSNBC.com, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/596354.asp> (page on site discontinued).

7. Mark O'Keefe, "Women Account for Hefty Portion of Web Porn Viewing," *Newhouse News Service*, October 31, 2003, <http://www.newhouse.com/archive/okeefe103103.html> (page on site discontinued).

8. Adele Horin, "One in Three Porn Viewers are Women," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26, 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/one-in-three-porn-viewers-are-women/2007/05/25/1179601669066.html>.

9. Quoted in Violet Blue, "Are More Women OK With Watching Porn?," *CNN*, July 24, 2009, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-07-24/living/o.women.watching.porn_1_arousal-candida-royalle-explicit-sexual-imagery?_s=PM:LIVING. Note: The original Nielsen NetRatings reports have been removed from the NetRatings site. Nielsen is now reluctant to associate itself with figures relating to adult sites. However I did receive an assurance from a Nielsen spokesperson that the statistics are accurate.

From Text to Context: Feminist Porn and the Making of a Market



LYNN COMELLA

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Introduction

For six months in 2001 I worked on the sales floor at the feminist sex-toy retailer Babeland's Lower East Side store in New York City.¹ My daily tasks included everything from restocking vibrators to ringing up sales to talking with customers—young and old, male and female, straight and queer—about the G-spot, the P-spot, and everything in between. Hands down, my favorite part of the job was helping novice porn consumers navigate the store's expansive collection of porn. On a regular basis, customers asked: Do you carry porn for women? Porn with a plot? Couples porn? Lesbian porn? Something I can take home to my girlfriend, boyfriend, wife, or husband? For some, figuring out where to begin was a daunting prospect. Many welcomed a little hand-holding and guidance along the way, and I was more than happy to supply it.

Babeland's porn collection was housed in a smart-looking display case at the back of the store. Unlike more traditional sex stores, where shelves of porn tend to dominate the inventory, at Babeland, if you weren't specifically shopping for porn you might never notice it. The bulk of the video library was discretely displayed in three-ringed binders organized by genre—heterosexual, LGBT, instructional, and classic

porn. Each binder contained clear plastic sleeves with a flattened video box cover slipped inside, and brief yet detailed video reviews written by Babeland staff.

Staff members at Babeland had spent a considerable amount of time and energy curating the store's porn collection. They had waded through catalogs with hundreds of porn titles to pick the ones that best fit the business's sex positive ethos and commitment to quality. They did their best to find porn with high production values, as well as porn made by companies with reputations for treating their actors well and compensating them fairly. Babeland took pride in offering its customers a mix of titles that weren't readily available at other stores in the city.

Babeland's porn collection was nothing if not eclectic. You could find porn made by some of the biggest and most profitable porn companies in the San Fernando Valley, such as Wicked and Vivid, sitting alongside porn by small lesbian-run production companies in San Francisco that had maxed out their credit cards to fund their projects. There were titles from porn's "golden age," such as *Debbie Does Dallas*, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, and *Café Flesh*, and a variety of how-to videos, including *How to Female Ejaculate*, *Bend Over Boyfriend*, and *Selfloving*. Babeland's porn buyer was committed to carrying titles that reflected the company's mission to promote sexual vitality and education, encourage personal empowerment, and support a more passionate world for all. And the more examples she could find that featured female pleasure and genuine orgasms, the better.

A great deal of research on pornography focuses on the pornographic text as the primary site of analysis. Far less attention has been paid by researchers to the broader cultural matrix in which porn texts circulate. With the advent of the VCR, video technology, and desktop publishing in the early 1980s, feminists had access to affordable means of production, which they used to create new kinds of sexual imagery for straight women, lesbians, queers, and couples. Yet getting feminist porn into the hands of consumers required much more than simply making it; it demanded new modes of marketing and distribution that could reach previously marginalized groups. Enter the feminist sex-toy store.

Babeland is part of a much larger network of sex-positive retailers whose *raison d'être* is providing customers—especially women—with quality products and accurate information in warm and welcoming retail environments. These stores are carefully designed to maximize the comfort level of even the most tentative shopper while simultaneously mitigating the "ick" factor commonly associated with conventional adult stores.² From Eve's Garden in New York City and Good Vibrations in San

Francisco to Self Serve in Albuquerque and Sugar in Baltimore, these, and similar businesses, have carved out a niche in the sexual marketplace by turning the prevailing logic of the adult industry on its head. Their primary focus is women rather than men; sexual openness not shame; sex positivity instead of negativity; and sex education as opposed to straight up titillation. Collectively, these businesses form what Claire Cavanah, co-founder of Babeland, describes as the “alternative sex-vending movement,” one committed to changing the cultural conversations about sex and pleasure.³

Good Vibrations and its sister stores have also served as launching pads for a number of sex-positive writers, sex-toy manufacturers, and pornographers who have gone on to leave their own sex-positive stamps on the world: Susie Bright was working at Good Vibrations when she began writing her column for *Penthouse Forum*; former Good Vibrations employee Marilyn Bishara started Vixen Creations, a silicone dildo company, in 1992 when she was working as a computer programmer at the store (Good Vibrations had experienced trouble getting consistent delivery on its silicone products, and Bishara, who realized she could do better, branched out on her own); Jackie Strano and Shar Rednour, the creative forces behind SIR Video, a lesbian porn production company, spent many years working at Good Vibrations, which is where the inspiration for their popular *Bend Over Boyfriend* series of instructional videos was conceived. The list of feminist entrepreneurs and cultural producers who sharpened their sex-positive chops while working on the sales floor at women-owned sex-toy stores, is a long and impressive one.

In mapping the analytic shift from porn text to context, I utilize a cultural studies approach that is committed to what communication scholar Larry Grossberg describes as a “radical contextualism,” one that “precludes defining culture, or the relations between culture and power, outside of the particular context into which cultural studies imagines itself to intervene.”⁴ In other words, the identity and effects of feminist pornography, as both a discursive intervention and form of cultural critique, do not exist apart from the larger sex-positive commercial context in which it resides. Within this recalibrated critical framework, the study of producers, texts, and audiences is not an end in itself, but becomes “the material with which cultural studies must grapple in its attempt to understand specific contextual relations of culture and power.”⁵

This essay draws on a decade’s worth of research on feminist sex-toy businesses in the United States in order to examine the broader context of sex positive cultural production, distribution, and retail—including new ways of talking about pornography, which helped create a viable mar-

ket for feminist porn.⁶ Over the past thirty years, sex-positive entrepreneurs, including feminist porn producers and retailers, have cultivated what I describe as a form of “sex-positive synergy” that links different enterprises together through a shared vision of changing the way the culture thinks and talks about sex. An important part of this synergy is the customer “feedback loop,” which has enabled a number of feminist and queer pornographers to take what they learned while working on the sales floor at feminist sex-toy stores and parlay this information back into the world of porn. “Sex-positive synergy” is a key component in understanding the larger marketplace dynamic that has shaped feminist porn as both a form of sexual entertainment and cultural critique.

The analytic shift from porn text to context is also a political intervention intended to challenge the essentialist and reductionist arguments about pornography that are frequently mobilized by antipornography feminists in an effort to discount feminist porn as a valid form of cultural critique. Sex-positive feminists—those who make, watch, study, and write about pornography—are frequently accused by antipornography feminists of lacking any meaningful critique of the mainstream porn industry. And while antiporn feminists may occasionally acknowledge porn made by and for women, they typically do so only in passing before dismissing it as irrelevant. The reasons for this vary, but include the stance that pornography geared toward women comprises such a small segment of a much larger industry that its effects are virtually negligible, or that porn for women apes, rather than challenges, the dominant codes and conventions used by mainstream pornographers whose sole motivation, according to this narrative, is profit. The notion of “sex-positive synergy” challenges these arguments.

New Texts, Fresh Contexts

It’s impossible to talk about the history of feminist porn in the United States without talking about Candida Royalle. A former adult entertainer, Royalle founded her own porn production company, Femme Productions, in 1984, and was one of the first women to imagine a viewing audience for pornography that went beyond the idealized male consumer. Royalle started her company with three goals in mind: she wanted to demonstrate it was possible to create porn that had integrity; to show that porn could be nonsexist; and to make people feel good about their sexuality. “I wanted to make films that say we all have a right to pleasure, and that women, especially, have a right to our own pleasure.”⁷

Because Royalle had consciously rejected many of the clichés and

conventions associated with mainstream pornography, her films were virtually unrecognizable to most middle-of-the-road porn distributors and storeowners. She encountered more than a few raised eyebrows and skeptical responses from people who either did not know how to market her films, or, more significantly, were unconvinced they would sell. According to Royalle:

I had to set out to prove that there was a market demand for adult movies that spoke about sex positively, made [women] feel good about our sexuality, and that presented a woman's voice. And [I wanted them to be] something of quality and integrity that couples could share. I was convinced that there was a demand for this and I was told that there wasn't when I started. Women were not interested. There was no such thing as a couples' market and that's all there was to it.⁹

For Royalle, the issue of distribution was particularly challenging, especially in the early 1980s, when the "women's market" for sexually oriented products existed almost entirely on the fringes of the adult entertainment industry. "I knew that what I had to do was get consumers to go into the stores and demand my products," she said. According to Royalle, retailers like Good Vibrations, along with Eve's Garden, were some of the first businesses "to open their doors to the idea that women wanted their own products and things aimed at them . . . knowing that there was already this tiny little [space] carved out where I could place my stuff gave me encouragement. And the fact that they showed support, that they carried my products, spoke well of them, and reviewed them highly was very important. *I think we really work hand in hand*" [emphasis mine].¹⁰

Good Vibrations offered a retail context that was well-suited to the kinds of films Royalle was making. The company was founded in 1977 by sex therapist and educator Joani Blank, and, throughout the 1970s and 80s, everything about its women-centered and educational focus was novel. Blank's goal from the start was to provide women "especially but not exclusively" access to a clean and well-lit sex-toy store, one that defied the stereotype of adult businesses as inherently seedy and inhospitable. Good Vibrations was, by design, the antithesis of the kind of adult store one might expect to find in the red light district of a typical US city. It was a highly gender-coded environment where women could buy their vibrators, talk about sex, and feel supported around their sexuality at a time when there were few places to do so. It wasn't long until Good Vibrations' unique approach to selling sex toys and talking about

sex became a model for other retailers interested in opening sex-positive stores in their own communities. The Good Vibrations model of sex retailing proliferated and, with it, the business's mission of sex positivity and social change.

One of the ways that Blank differentiated Good Vibrations from more stereotypically "lurid" adult stores was that she initially did not carry pornography. Blank was personally "not into videos"; but more than that, she felt that selling porn undercut the alternative retail vibe that she and her staff were trying to cultivate. Her attitude about pornography slowly began to change when she hired Susie Bright to work on the sales floor at Good Vibrations in the early eighties. Bright was a sex-positive powerhouse whose imagination was "completely captured" by Blank's vision for Good Vibrations. By the mid-1980s, Bright was working as a writer at *On Our Backs*, and she had also started to pen a regular column on pornography for *Penthouse Forum*. Bright's interest and knowledge about pornography soon found its way to Good Vibrations. She felt that it was important for Good Vibrations' customers to have access to a video rental library. "VHS was exploding," she told me. "Movies are like stories. They are just like books. It's education; it's entertainment. I thought of Good Vibrations as being part of the cultural conversation and expansion around sex, so not having movies was sort of like saying we don't use forks."¹¹

But Bright had to first convince Blank that carrying a carefully selected library of porn videos was not inherently antithetical to the store's women-centered, sex-positive mission. She did this not by generating an argument about potential sales or profitability—which in time became significant—but by convincing Blank in political terms that it was valuable for Good Vibrations' customers to have access to the world of fantasy and desire that porn offered. "I felt this was a fascinating world, and I was sick of women being kept out. I wanted everyone to know what I knew. And I knew that everybody wanted to peek."¹²

Bright and Blank initially shared some of the same reservations about having a video library, and they talked about how they might remedy these concerns to make the collection as accessible to as many people as possible while still fitting with the store's sex-positive, women-friendly mission. As Bright recounted:

[Joani] was like, 'You know what I hate? Those awful box covers.' And I was like, 'I know. They suck.' They are misleading and cheesy and just the kind of thing to make our customers run screaming into the night. I said that we just won't have them. We will write our own

descriptions for movies, and we will take the black VHS tape and just put it in a blank box. This way, everybody will be watching things based on what we say about it, and they won't see this stupid, pouty girl in a bikini with her tongue sticking out that has no relationship to what the movie is about. That was her biggest concern. She didn't know anything about the content of porn and what it was like. It was also a concern of mine, because I felt like those covers were misleading, and part of the crap production values that made so many women turn away from porn.¹³

In 1989 Good Vibrations took the plunge and began carrying a small collection of pornography, which Bright had carefully screened and selected. The collection was small, containing less than twenty titles.¹⁴ As former Good Vibrations staff member Roma Estevez, who eventually took over the porn buying and reviewing responsibilities after Bright left the company, recounted:

The video collection was controversial at first, but Susie slowly began to convince reluctant customers of the benefits of erotic film. In Susie's mind, porn was a vehicle, much like erotic literature or paintings, which, like sex toys, could enhance one's sexual experiences. Soon, her collection of favorites became acceptable to customers, and then, very popular. Good Vibrations was a very different place to rent pornography. Certainly there were other venues in the city to rent such films, but they lacked the charm and the 'clean, well-lighted' atmosphere that was Good Vibrations.¹⁵

Good Vibrations was one of the first businesses to provide customers with a warm and inviting place where they could browse for porn. But it also offered customers more than just soft lighting and comfy chairs; it gave them permission to look at images that, for many people, had previously been off-limits, and armed them with information about directors, actors, and genres intended to increase their porn literacy. As Cathy Winks writes in the *Good Vibrations Guide to Adult Videos*:

It didn't take long for us to realize that we were providing a completely unique service for a grateful and enthusiastic audience. Good Vibrations was in the right place at the right time to represent the erotic tastes of consumers largely ignored by the mainstream adult industry: women, male/female couples and lesbians. Whether our customers were novices with next to no prior exposure to porn, or experienced "connoisseurs," they appreciated our efforts to sift through the thousands of erotic videos released every year in search of the cream of the crop.¹⁶

The experiences of Candida Royalle, and her quest for distributors and retail outlets that would carry her movies, and Susie Bright, who recognized the ways that pornography fit with Good Vibrations' sex-positive mission, force us to enlarge the scope of our analyses to include the wider cultural and commercial contexts that enable feminist texts to circulate. In other words, feminist cultural production, including pornography, involves much more than just making texts; it also involves making sex-positive *contexts* and creating favorable conditions of reception.

Sex Education and Synergy

Sex education has been a staple of the Good Vibrations model of retailing since its inception. Indeed, one of the most important ways that Good Vibrations and its sister stores have differentiated themselves from more conventional adult businesses is that they have traditionally led with sex education rather than profit for profit's sake—an approach that, throughout the years, has certainly presented its own unique set of challenges. By and large, sex-positive retailers see their businesses as a way to provide customers with a much needed service, one of sexual education, empowerment, and personal transformation. A Good Vibrations employee summed it up this way: “I think our mission is not just about profits, or selling sex toys for the money, it’s about selling sex toys as a vehicle to get accurate information out there and change people’s attitudes about sex.”¹⁷

But it’s not just sex toys that serve as conversation starters and vehicles for disseminating accurate information about sex. A number of people, from filmmakers to scholars, have recognized the potential for pornography to serve as a medium for sex education. Robert Eberwein’s comprehensive history of sex education in film and video demonstrates that since the early part of the twentieth century the technology of moving images was used as a tool for dispensing information about sex, from films about venereal disease in the early twentieth century, to safer sex education films in the 1980s, to Betty Dodson’s videos about female sexual pleasure in the 1990s.¹⁸

For some sex educators, including feminist author and porn director Tristan Taormino, working on the sales floor at a feminist sex toy store was an opportunity to tap into the sexual psyche of the typical American sexual consumer. As Taormino writes in the introduction to her book *Down and Dirty Sex Secrets*:

Every day I worked [at Babeland], dozens of ordinary folks walked through the door looking for what we had inside. Their searches almost always began with a question. Most of them were complete strangers, and yet they told me things that were extremely personal and deeply intimate. Their revelations were sometimes moving, sometimes surprising, and always fascinating.¹⁹

For Taormino, an upshot of working at a place like Babeland was that she had direct contact with customers. She was able to hear straight from them, unfiltered, which aspects of human sexuality most interested them and piqued their curiosity. More often than not, her interactions with customers on the sales floor left her feeling like a sex therapist, someone who was uniquely positioned to help people have better and more fulfilling sex lives.

Feeling like a therapist wasn't an entirely new experience for Taormino. By the time she started working at Babeland she had already written her first book, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* and had toured the country promoting it. "I knew this was a book that I needed to write, and that it would appeal to men and women. I knew that I wasn't the only one who was desperately searching for good information on anal sex," she told me in an interview years ago.²⁰ She also realized that book's subject—a how-to guide about anal sex for women—"did not exactly lend itself to the traditional book reading" at a place like Barnes & Noble. "Most bookstores weren't clamoring to create a huge poster of the cover, put it in the window, and announce a book signing by me. It was no *Chicken Soup for your Ass*, even if I thought it was."²¹ Instead, Taormino had to find creative ways to promote the book, and feminist sex-toy stores seemed like a logical place to find a receptive audience.

Taormino taught workshops on anal sex at sex-toy stores across the country as a way to promote her book. During her tour, people began asking when she was going to turn the *Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* into an instructional sex video. The following year, in 1999, she teamed up with John Stagliano from Evil Angel and produced her first adult film, an instructional sex video based on her award-winning book.

It's likely that Taormino would have eventually turned the *Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* into a sexually explicit video without the encouragement of fans. But the positive feedback she received from people who had attended her workshops—her potential audience, in fact—was a barometer that allowed her to gauge the level of interest for the video, even before the project was off the ground. According to Taormino:

People were asking me about a video—and I’ve always been a big cheerleader for porn. I had been doing a lot of different sex workshops, and working at Babeland, and I felt like I wanted to make this video. My purpose with the video—which I say in it—is that I not only want to teach people how to have safe, pleasurable anal sex, but I want to inspire them to run out and do it.²²

Taormino’s experience promoting her book, and, in turn, making her first movie, is instructive for what it suggests not only about the larger context of sex-positive feminist cultural production, but the importance of the customer “feedback loop.” Working at Babeland and conducting workshops across the country allowed Taormino to take the pulse of a subset of the American sexual marketplace. Rather than groping in the dark, the almost daily conversations she had about sex with people of all genders, ages, and sexual orientations, from many corners to the country, became resources for future books and films that were tailored, to some extent, around the kinds of things that Taormino’s target audience said were gaps in the marketplace of sexual information and imagery.

Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano had a similar experience with their first film, *Bend Over Boyfriend*, which they co-produced with Fatale Video, an established lesbian porn production company in San Francisco.²³ Rednour had previously worked as the managing editor of *On Our Backs* magazine and had worked on several different shoots for Fatale Video; Strano, meanwhile, was working on the sales floor at Good Vibrations. By the late 1990s, the two realized that interest in anal sex, particularly from women who wanted to anally penetrate their male partners, was growing. “Everybody I knew, all the straight girls and all the bi girls, [wanted to do it], and everybody [who was] coming into the store wanting strap-on-dildos and wanting to know how to do it to their boyfriend or husband. It just seemed like all of the sudden people were talking about it,” Strano recounted.²⁴ At the time, there was virtually no reliable information on the subject, and the two knew that this was the film they needed to make.

Rednour and Strano were confident that if women were coming into Good Vibrations in San Francisco—an admittedly slightly skewed sample—with interest in learning more about bending over their boyfriends, then it was only a matter of time before women across the country would ask how they, too, could be in the driver’s seat. As Rednour explained: “We knew if there were twenty people that we had waited on [at Good Vibrations], then that was the crest of the wave that was going to be coming if you just gave it a little bit of a push.”²⁵ They decided there was

no better way to widely disseminate accurate and safe information to couples interested in exploring male anal play than to package this information in the form of an instructional sex video that could be both sexy and educational at the same time.

While the duo had long wanted to create hot porn for lesbians, they also wanted to help people of all sexual orientations have better, more intimate, and more satisfying sex lives. SIR Video's mission, in simple terms, is to "change the way people fuck." And part of this mission includes creating porn that is entertaining, especially for women. As they had learned from working at women-centered enterprises like *On Our Backs* and *Good Vibrations*, entertaining women often involved first educating them that they had a fundamental right to enjoy sex in whatever form it may take, be it a piece of erotic writing, a vibrator, or pornography.

Bend Over Boyfriend features sex educators Carol Queen and Robert Morgan as the video's anal "sexperts." "We are here to teach you how to do it right and also help you understand that any fantasies that you have had about sharing this kind of intimate play can come true in a safe and fun manner," Queen says, as she looks directly into the camera. In frank, accessible, and matter-of-fact language intended to instruct and inform, Queen and Morgan work to dispel common myths and misperceptions about anal sex, and offer encouragement and practical advice to viewers interested in expanding their sexual repertoires through anal play.

Bend Over Boyfriend offers sexual education that emphasizes sex-positive synergy. The video not only instructs those watching at home how they can have safe and enjoyable anal sex—lube is a must, Queen and Morgan emphasize—but it also models for viewers how to watch an instructional sex video and put whatever tips and advice they may get into practice. This is done by showing two different couples sitting in front of their respective television sets—popcorn and remote controls in hand—watching the video and, eventually, getting down to business.

But the most interesting aspect of *Bend Over Boyfriend* is the way it coaches viewers to be well-informed and savvy sexual consumers. This discourse of consumption is not buried in the video, but is explicitly rendered. At one point, Queen finishes a detailed discussion about the different kinds of sex toys one might use for anal sex—from silicone butt plugs to leather harnesses—and instructs those watching at home to "grab your credit card, go shopping, and meet me back here." Thus, a very clear dialogue is established in the video between text and context, sex education and consumption, articulating these things together in a highly synergistic and seamless way. As Ragan Rhyne notes in her essay

about SIR Video and the education of consumption, “SIR’s integration of consumption into its videos is, in many ways, a move to create a self-sustaining economy for the continued production of alternative lesbian pornography outside of the control of the mainstream industry.”²⁶

I would offer a slightly different reading than the one Rhyme proposes about the role that pedagogies of consumption play in SIR’s videos. Integrating discourses of consumption into the narrative fabric of *Bend Over Boyfriend* is less about *creating* a self-sustaining sexual economy, and more about recognizing the extent to which its videos are indebted to, and part of, a much larger, interconnected network of sex-positive culture producers, from dildo manufacturers like Vixen Creations to retailers such as Good Vibrations. Here, the circuit of cultural production comes full circle: consumers wanted quality information about sexual subjects not readily available to them; SIR wanted to make videos that could deliver information about sex in an entertaining and accurate way; and stores such as Good Vibrations were looking for exactly the kind of feminist and queer-oriented porn that Rednour and Strano were making, in large part because customers were asking for it. The result is a version of sex-positive synergy that is not ancillary to the history of feminist porn and the growth of women’s market, but a fundamental part of the broader commercial context that has shaped feminist porn as a form of discursive intervention and cultural critique.

In 2009 Good Vibrations took the idea of sex-positive synergy one step further when it launched a porn production arm of the company called Good Releasing.²⁷ Good Releasing features three separate video lines: HeartCore films, the Pleasure-Ed series, and Reel Queer Productions, the latter of which fills a niche in the adult entertainment industry for edgy and authentic queer representations. With Good Releasing, the company is involved in everything from project development and production to distribution and sales, resulting in a form of vertical integration that extends the project that Susie Bright started more than two decades ago: incorporating pornography into conversations about sex by inviting people, especially women, to take a peek.

Conclusion: Feminist Porn as Cultural Critique

As I mentioned in the introduction, sex-positive feminists, including feminist porn producers and scholars who study pornography, are often accused by antipornography feminists of lacking a critique of the mainstream adult industry. It is an assessment that strips feminist pornography of its interventionist impulses, divorces it from its wider sex-positive

context, and reduces it to a seemingly pointless reiteration of the very representational codes and conventions it professes to challenge.

A case in point involves commentary about the 2011 Adult Entertainment Expo penned by antipornography feminist Gail Dines. She takes to task the “predatory capitalists” who fill the “airless, poorly lit conference rooms” at the Sands Expo and Convention Center in Las Vegas. “What excites these guys (and it was overwhelmingly guys),” she writes, recalling her visit to the Expo in 2008, “is not sex, but money.”²⁸ She continues:

One of the seminars at this year’s expo is called In the Company of Women. Here academics will mix with pornographers to share ideas on how to develop niche products targeted to women. I’m sure there will be lots of talk about how women can be empowered by watching porn, because the pornographers, being the savvy businessmen they are, like nothing more than telling women that porn is actually good for them. This is their “trick,” and one we must resist if we want to replace the plasticised, formulaic and generic images of the pornographers with an authentic sexuality based on our own experiences, longings and desires.²⁹

The seminar Dines references—although did not attend—was one that I had moderated and helped to organize. In fact, joining me on stage were two feminist sex-toy retailers, Jacq Jones from Sugar in Baltimore and Mattie Fricker from Self Serve in Albuquerque, accompanied by Carol Queen from Good Vibrations, Diana DeVoe, a female porn producer, and Greg DeLong, the founder of Njoy, a sex-positive company that makes high quality, stainless steel sex toys. It was hardly the cesspool of women-hating “tricksters” and “predatory capitalists” that Dines describes; rather, the very composition of the panel reflects the kind of sex-positive synergy and entrepreneurship I’ve discussed throughout this essay.³⁰

Feminist pornography is not a series of stand-alone texts that exist outside of a much wider context—and history—of sex-positive feminist cultural production and commerce. Nor is feminist porn divorced from meaningful critiques of sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism. To suggest otherwise is to at best selectively ignore, or, at worst completely disregard, four decades of feminist pleasure activism around topics like female masturbation, sex education, sex toys, and pornography. Sex-positive cultural production, including feminist pornography, has *always* engaged with, and responded to, the limits, exclusions, and biases of the mainstream adult industry. Indeed, there would be little need for something called “feminist porn”—or feminist sex-toy stores, for that

matter—if the mainstream adult industry was a feminist utopia with a long legacy of celebrating female sexuality in all its permutations.

While it might be convenient, at least for the sake of one's argument, to posit that within the realm of commercial sex, buying and using a vibrator or reading erotica are vastly different practices than watching pornography, the history of the women's market for sex toys and pornography suggests something quite different: that as platforms for sexual education and modes of expression, these cultural forms—and their uses and effects—might not be as different as some people would like to believe. Moreover, branding anyone associated with the world of pornography as a “predatory capitalist” fails to recognize that consumer capitalism is not fixed and unchanging, nor are its meanings given in advance. Rather, the sexual marketplace, like other realms of consumer culture, can be used for socially progressive purposes, including sex education and social change.

Finally, the move from text to context is not only an analytic shift in terms of how we talk and think about feminist pornography, it is also a political move that enables us to better account for the ways in which feminist pornography is deeply embedded within a much larger network of sex-positive feminist cultural production. As scholar Larry Grossberg reminds us, an examination of cultural phenomena cannot take place in isolation from “specific cultural practices within their complexly determined and determining contexts”—a lesson, I think, that the history of feminist pornography as a form of sexual entertainment, discursive intervention, and cultural critique teaches us especially well.³¹

Notes

1. My work at Babeland was part of a multilocation ethnographic project that examined the history and retail culture of feminist sex-toy businesses in the United States. In addition to conducting six months of fieldwork at Babeland, I visited a number of sex-toy stores across the country and interviewed more than seventy-five proprietors, sales staff members, marketers, sex-toy manufacturers, and pornographers in an effort to understand the commercial world of sex-positive retailing.

2. Sex positivity counters the idea that sex is an inherently negative, dangerous, and destructive force. As a discourse, and, some may argue, a sexual ethic, sex positivity promotes the idea that people deserve accurate information about, and support around, their sexuality.

3. Claire Cavanah, interview with author, August 30, 2001, New York, NY.

4. Larry Grossberg, “Can Cultural Studies find True Happiness in Communication?” *Journal of Communication* 43 (1993): 90.

5. Grossberg, “Cultural Studies,” 93.

6. See Lynn Comella, "Selling Sexual Liberation: Women-Owned Sex Toy Stores and the Business of Social Change" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2004).
7. Candida Royalle, "Porn in the USA," in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000), 541.
8. Candida Royalle, telephone interview with author, November 7, 2001.
9. Royalle, interview.
10. Royalle, interview.
11. Susie Bright, telephone interview with author, June 18, 2010.
12. Bright, interview.
13. Bright, interview.
14. Cathy Winks, *The Good Vibrations Guild to Adult Videos* (San Francisco: Down There Press, 1998), vii.
15. Roma Estevez, "Good Vibrations" (Unpublished paper, University of Massachusetts, Amherst 2000).
16. Winks, *Good Vibrations*, vii.
17. Ziadee Whiptail, telephone interview with author, March 29, 2002.
18. Robert Eberwein, *Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).
19. Tristan Taormino, *Down and Dirty Sex Secrets* (New York: Regan Books, 2001), 1.
20. Tristan Taormino, telephone interview with author, November 2, 1999.
21. Taormino, *Down and Dirty Sex Secrets*, 3.
22. Taormino, interview.
23. *Bend Over Boyfriend*, directed by Shar Rednour (San Francisco, CA: Fatale Video, 1998), Videocassette.
24. Jackie Strano, interview with author, June 6, 2002, Berkeley, CA.
25. Shar Rednour, interview with author, June 6, 2002, Berkeley, CA.
26. Ragan Rhyne, "Hard Core Shopping: Educating Consumption in SIR Video Production's Lesbian Porn," *The Velvet Light Trap* 59 (2007): 50.
27. Good Vibrations had previously launched Sex Positive Productions in 2001. Despite rave reviews and mainstream recognition for some of its films, including *Slide Bi Me*, which was nominated for an Adult Video News Award in 2002, the experiment proved costly and was disbanded after only a few short years.
28. Gail Dines, "Porn: A Multibillion-Dollar Industry that Renders all Authentic Desire Plastic," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/04/pornography-big-business-influence-culture>.
29. Dines, "Porn."
30. Lynn Comella, "Feminists Gone Wild: A Response to Porn Critic Gail Dines," *Las Vegas Weekly*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/2011/feb/02/feminists-gone-wild-response-porn-critic-gail-dine/>.
31. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies," 93.

A Question of Feminism



SINNAMON LOVE

Sinamon Love is an adult performer and fetish model. She began performing in adult films in the early 1990s, and has since appeared in approximately two hundred movies. She directed the movie *My Black Ass 4*, which received nominations at the 2001 AVN Awards for Best Ethnic-Themed Video and Best Anal Sex Scene (Video). Love was inducted into the Urban X Hall of Fame in 2009, and the AVN Hall of Fame in 2011. She was profiled in the book *Money Shot: The Wild Nights and Lonely Days Inside the Black Porn Industry* by Lawrence C. Ross Jr. Her writing has appeared in *Hos*, *Hookers*, *Call Girls*, and *Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex*, edited by David Henry Sterry and R. J. Martin Jr.

In 2009, I sat on a panel with notable feminist academics and a feminist pornographer—all of whom were well-respected. I was put on the spot when asked, “Do you consider yourself and your work to be feminist?” I didn’t know how to answer. I tried to steady my voice as I replied, “I’ve never really given that any thought.” The other panelists gave their view of my work and what they knew about me . . . but the question, which I had to answer for myself, remained: “Am I a feminist?”

I was naive about the sexual liberation movement, and had never considered whether or not my decision to flaunt my sexuality on screen was a feminist act. I had never wondered whether fighting for the right to be both mother and sex worker was part of a greater fight for the rights of women around the world. I certainly had never given thought to whether my choice to be tied up, disciplined, and fucked by men and women on film contributed to sexual freedom. All I knew was that I alone was responsible for my body, my life, my sexuality, and my bills. It never crossed my mind that someone might tell me what I should or shouldn’t do with my body or my sex. I knew that prostitution was illegal, and had heard rumblings of the unsuccessful fight for decriminalization in the United States. I knew pornography wasn’t the same as

prostitution, by legal definition, but had no clue about the fight in courtrooms to make it so. I was like many of the porn stars of my generation who entered the adult film industry with the intent of earning a living, having a good time, or both.

When I walked onto my first adult film set at nineteen, I had never seen a porn movie or magazines or been to a strip club. I merely wanted to provide for my family and finish college. I wanted to have a kind of financial stability that I didn't see possible as a divorced, single mother of two toddlers working two mall jobs and carrying a full load of classes. That first time, having sex with a complete stranger in his apartment wasn't about a feminist agenda or some sort of promiscuous sexual itch I sought to scratch. It was about the best option I saw for myself at that time; it was about financial freedom.

Even years later, while embroiled in a bitter custody battle, where my decision to work in pornographic movies was a critical issue, I still didn't consider my fight to be feminist. My angry ex-husband walked into the courtroom holding a VHS box with my image on the cover in a school-girl uniform, accusing me of "portraying a child" in the movie. The black female judge that mediated my divorce and subsequent custody hearing told him that my porn career was irrelevant unless there was evidence that the children were neglected or exposed to porn. Was she a feminist? I think the judge was merely following the law, and I was fortunate enough to have gone through the experience in California, where making porn has been legal since 1988.

There is no doubt in my mind today that I am a feminist. I believe first and foremost in choice—whether it's a woman's right to choose to work outside the home or the right to a safe, legal abortion. I believe that "no means no," and provocative attire is never an excuse for rape. I believe in sex-positive childrearing and the right for every person to marry regardless of sexual orientation. I believe that what happens between two consenting adults behind closed doors should never be criminalized and, more importantly, that men and women who choose to engage in sex work for money should be protected, taxed, and able to receive medical benefits as in any other industry.

The question still looms about whether I consider my work to be feminist. I'm not sure I know the answer, even today. I don't think I've ever walked on a video set, turned on my webcam, or worked as a dominatrix with the thought of making a political statement. I've set a goal to enjoy my work so that my fans will enjoy it as well. I find myself more concerned with the representation of black women's sexuality than making a statement only about my gender. Perhaps this is because so many people

fight the good fight on behalf of (white) women and so few are fighting for black women like me. For example, there are countless examples of white women's sexualities portrayed in porn, but very limited images of African American women. And when you do see black women in porn, they are often stereotyped or demeaned.

When I first started in the industry, I quickly saw that the images of women of color in porn were directly related to what the predominantly white male directors thought was sexy and what they believed their (predominantly white) male audience would find sexy. As a result, the majority of African American women on screen were put into one of two categories: assimilated to appear as close to white as possible ("they are almost one of us") or completely ghettoized to reflect debased images of black culture (it doesn't matter because "they are only one of them"). The first group was easy to spot: long hair weaves, lighter skin, thinner physical frames, enhanced busts, and smaller hips and butts. These women could also be cast in larger budget movies. Women with bigger butts, curvier bodies, darker complexions, and more African features were relegated to movies with lower production values and often-offensive titles. It wasn't until female and black directors and producers began to influence the marketplace that porn videos started to showcase other aspects of black life and black and/or interracial couples in a more diverse light.

In the 1990s, I had a conversation with the owner (a white guy) of a video company that produced mainly videos featuring black actors, but the women were always skinny, light-skinned girls. He told me his product was produced for the people who bought his movies: white men. He said black men are renters, not buyers. One of the biggest mistakes mainstream pornographers makes is thinking their market is not interested in any other images of black women except these outrageously stereotyped ones. The industry also does not understand why black consumers might want to rent porn rather than buy. The lack of market research allows directors and producers to remain uninformed, and to cater only to their own sexual likes and dislikes. One would think, especially in today's oversaturated marketplace, that pornographers would seek to produce for both the current buying population and those who have yet to be convinced to spend their money.

Female directors have an advantage in producing adult movies because of their unique perspectives. Understanding the female body—the importance of the little things, from hair and makeup, to location and shooting from flattering angles—creates a better product. It's easy to look at directors like Joanna Angel, Belladonna, Julie Simone, and Chanta Rose and witness how they manage to produce beautiful

images of women but still get these women to push their limits in intense scenes. Perhaps some women feel more comfortable with a woman behind the camera asking them to do things that might be deemed degrading if asked by a male director. Some women might feel more at ease with their egos massaged by showing up on the set to find accommodations for wardrobe, makeup, and hair, and food available. These considerations, which often fall to the performers to provide in order to save on the budget, make a world of difference in getting a performer to give her all.

As a performer and director, I want to show varied sexual dynamics between African American couples, especially more images of black men and women practicing BDSM. The majority of black-on-black porn is generally limited to boy/girl or girl/girl sex scenes, gangbangs, or orgies. Rarely do you see more intense hardcore, blowbangs, rough sex, and/or fetish content featuring all black actors. These types of scenes are more likely to be interracial and feature a submissive white woman paired with a dominant/aggressive black man taking charge and/or advantage of her—or a submissive yet hypersexual black female is paired with an aggressive white male performer.

As a black woman in porn, my experiences were unique. I came into the industry at a time when there was only a handful of African American women performing in films. I didn't fit into any existing category. As a "barely legal" looking nineteen year old, I was often cast in films with older white men and women and older black or Latin men. Throughout the 1990s, I found myself in videos with titles like *South Central Hookers #10*, or ones taken from popular rap songs like "Pumps 'n da Rump." I attribute my varied experience in working for both larger production houses on feature films and for smaller companies with equally smaller budgets to the fact that I have Caucasian features, light skin, and a cheery attitude, and speak in standard English. I found that movies featuring all black casts would have derogatory titles but movies with interracial casts would have sexier names. Directors often told me that I wasn't "ghetto" enough or expressed surprise that I couldn't "shake my ass" like other stars. I had to stress to a director that I wasn't comfortable standing on a street corner in a short skirt and high heels while he drove around the block for a "pickup shot" for my scene. And it wasn't only white directors who demeaned black actors. A few years ago, a black director asked me to eat a slice of watermelon for a scene with a white co-star who was playing a "country bumpkin." I refused. My co-star was so uncomfortable with the "step and fetch it" routine that the director wanted me to portray that he offered to take the bite instead.

But racist instances like this are not the norm. I have had more positive experiences in the industry than negative ones. When people ask me, “Is there racism in porn?” I respond that it exists no more in porn than in other industries. I don’t think people go out of their way to disrespect others. Of course, it is difficult to watch the industry celebrate only a handful of men and women of color each year at its biggest awards shows—but it isn’t a surprise. I see the adult industry as no different from mainstream Hollywood where they pick and choose which actors of color or women or gay actors to applaud each year and which to ignore . . . despite how amazing they are.

When I started in porn, I didn’t have a stage name. I was given the name “Sinnamon.” I had no idea how difficult it would be later to market myself with this name when I wanted to potentially act beyond the adult world. Black and Latina women in porn are very often given names of food, cars, inanimate objects, countries, and spices: Chocolate, Champagne, Mocha, Mercedes, Toy, Persia, Africa, India, and yes, Sinnamon. No one ever told me, or many women of my generation, how important it was to have a name that was a real woman’s name, something that would allow you to market yourself outside porn and to a wider audience. The Jennas, Janines, Brittanys of my generation certainly had greater success. Notably so, Heather Hunter, Dominique Simone, Lana Sands, and later Crystal Knight, Lacey Duvalle, Marie Luv, and Nyomi Banxxx are all women of color who were more successful than previous women in the industry. They had two things in common: they had “real” names and they fit white standards of beauty.

Even with the explosion of the porn star agent and the staggering growth of Internet companies, many black adult stars still show up as either the token black girl in a video or appear exclusively in all black videos. The same faces can be found in interracial scenes with white men, and only a handful will appear in fetish and BDSM videos for companies like Kink.com. Having been the first black woman that companies like Kink.com (then called Cybernet) shot, I recall having long conversations with directors about my personal relationship with BDSM. They hesitated to film me because they feared the fallout of putting a black woman in bondage in their movies. Oddly enough, when I worked for the late Bruce Seven in the early 1990s, that conversation never came up, but Bruce Seven was ahead of his time and understood BDSM as more than a different niche of film. I’ve been pleasantly surprised at how much has changed, with more and more women of color appearing in submissive positions on BDSM sites. But I’m still waiting for black men to be able to take the lead in those scenes with black women.

I wrote my sexual story, one chapter at a time, in each and every video I've made. I've used my work in porn to explore many firsts and share those experiences with my fans: sex with a woman, double penetration, group sex, double anal, a blowbang, a gangbang, or my first time with a Japanese woman who didn't speak English. I've let them watch me make love with a real-life partner and fuck complete strangers I had just met moments before the cameras rolled. I've even allowed my fans to watch me pregnant, horny, and *Forced to Lactate*.

My decision to explore many of my sexual firsts had little to do with my fans who would later watch these videos. Though I was aware that people would likely see my scenes later on, I was naive as to just how big the industry was. To me, I was merely having sex, experimenting with my sexuality, and being recorded while doing so. My fans weren't a factor until years later. I became more aware of my image when I saw less than flattering images of myself on box covers. I began to be more mindful of wardrobe and hairstyles and started to pick projects based on my ability to work with directors who brought out the best in me rather than how much money I could make.

I've raised my own neophyte-feminist, decidedly prochoice, very proud, out, bisexual young teenage daughter, a high-functioning autistic teenage son, and an older daughter in college who is a gun-toting NRA member, currently torn between her previous Republican ideologies and a more liberal way of thinking. When my younger daughter started high school, I explained to her that often teenage boys (and girls) like to use beautiful, intelligent, curvy, sexually curious young women like her to enhance their own sexual exploration and to be cautious not to allow others to write her sexual story.

I am often asked if I would "allow" or "want" my daughter(s) to enter into the porn business or the sex industry as a whole. I'm always torn in answering this question because I feel very strongly that there is absolutely nothing wrong with sex work. As a parent, I would not want any of my children to enter the industry knowing the kind of public ridicule or stigma they would likely face for their decision. I believe that free will extends outside of religion and that as a parent, all I can do is be 100 percent supportive of my children and love them despite their choices. All I can do is exactly as my parents did: prepare my children with the best possible education they can get, give them opportunities to excel in whatever endeavors they pursue, and support their dreams. As parents, we might have our own hopes and dreams for our children, but ultimately, it is for them to decide what path they wish to take. I would certainly give my child(ren) who chose sex work information

on pitfalls (and people) to avoid. I would want them to carve their own path no matter where it takes them. Would I be disappointed if one of them found their way into the sex industry? Perhaps, but I would only hope that they follow my example of balancing work and home, avoid drugs, and not allow themselves to get caught up in the seedier side of the industry.

As I spend more time behind a computer monitor and less time in front of the camera these days, I find myself more and more engaged in the fight for sex worker rights and better sex education than ever before. I am at this stage in my life where I am more conscious of my socio-political stance than I ever was in the first eighteen years of my career. Moving forward, would I consider myself and my work to be feminist? Absolutely. Today, I make decisions based on socially conscious thought rather than the fantasy of sexual exploration and the reality of economics. I am far more selective than I was at nineteen in the type of work I choose. I learned to diversify my income streams, which makes it easier to decline work that I feel goes against my core values and political beliefs. I no longer accept work that represents African Americans or black culture in a derogatory light. I am not willing to accept work for less pay merely because another performer is willing to perform for less.

Having spent the last nineteen years—my entire adult life—in the adult film industry, I have learned that my sexual interests are vast and that my intellectual curiosity often seeps into my sensual desires. My personal life has been greatly influenced by my work. The people I've met, the news articles I read, the stories that warm or break my heart come from a place of understanding the struggle of sex workers around the world. I find that my political interests include supporting and advocating for sex worker rights based on my own experiences and those of others I've encountered. Because I'm a parent, I advocate for comprehensive sex education in schools, particularly in black and brown communities, as I have come to realize that sex education is greatly lacking except for information about the risks of disease and pregnancy. I have come to realize the extreme need for specialized sex education for developmentally delayed teens and adults, as these people have sexual desires that often go overlooked.

I suppose, if I were to label who I am today, I would call myself a black feminist pornographer. Instead of accepting work merely to insure the bills get paid, I purposefully work for directors and companies that portray black female sexuality in ways that I feel are expansive, progressive, and interesting. In my own productions, I strive to show more positive images of black men and women in sexual situations that don't require

stereotypes to get the point across. I would love to see more pornography without stereotypes about black people, and that instead displays more complexity in the characters and fantasies presented. Every thug in a movie doesn't have to have a forty ounce bottle of beer in hand. Every curvaceous woman doesn't have to have booty shorts and bounce her ass as if she's in a music video. Every black man doesn't have to refer to himself using the N-word while having sex with a white woman on film. Black and interracial porn movies ignore the diversity in black culture. For some, stereotypical and fetishistic images of black people are part of the fantasy, but I still believe that the porn industry is neglecting a huge marketplace. Where is black porn for black women?

I hate labels. But in trying to answer the question of my own feminism I find myself needing to define my personal truth. I am certainly a sex-positive feminist. My work with sex worker rights advocacy and education, my interest in the decriminalization of prostitution, and my belief that pornography and BDSM are not inherently wrong, come from my own understanding of the importance of women's ability to claim their sexuality as their own. Yet my sex-positive feminism is not separate from my black feminism. For me it is about agency. My black feminism is about helping women like me to be able to claim their sexuality in the face of decades of mis-education of African American women who were made to believe that they must choose between education, marriage, and family, or sexual freedom. I have come to realize in this phase of my life and career, that I have unknowingly dedicated my experience in social media to showing men and women of color that these are false choices, and that they can be sexual beings, wives, husbands, mothers, and fathers. I want to show people that there is nothing wrong with black love, black sex, and black families. I find that so many black women are afraid of their sexuality—that relinquishing their sexual urges might separate them from God and church and would banish them from everything good and pure . . . the patriarchal image of the hypersexual black female leaves more and more black women on the outside looking in on the sex-positive movement. I want to be a voice for a sex-positive black feminism that is eager to transform pornography into a space where we can have our images and fantasies reflected, too.

Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors



MIREILLE MILLER-YOUNG

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Vanessa Blue decided to become a porn director thanks to her grandparents. “My grandparents had a whole room dedicated to smut,” she explained. “Smut and two Lazy Boys.”¹ I had gone to visit Vanessa in her Woodland Hills condo to talk to the performer-turned-director and webmistress about her life and latest work.² She told me about how she grew up with porn in her home, so it was in no way a foreign concept to her. In fact, when she began to perform in the late 1990s, it was her grandparents in Nebraska who found out first. “I’m looking at this movie *Dirty Debutantes #61*, and that sure does look like you,” she recalled her grandmother saying, hilariously exaggerating her aged voice on the phone. “After that first scene and everybody found out, I was like fuck it. I might as well finish what I started,” Vanessa explained, shrugging her shoulders.

“But what exactly drove you to start making your own porn, not just acting in it?” I asked. “I always loved porn and I always wanted to make it and to be a part of it,” Vanessa asserted. “I liked watching people be free and enjoy themselves, and I liked shooting it. I always wanted to be behind the camera . . . [I thought] Let me see if I can become the director.” For Vanessa, being confronted by her grandmother about working as a porn actress forced her to think about what she really wanted. Her family did not celebrate her work in the sex industry but they understood it. What her family really wanted was for her to control her labor, rather than be controlled by someone else. If the sex industry offered

that opportunity, then she should take it. Her grandparents sternly told her: “We are not saying it is wrong that you do porn, it’s not. Just don’t let these people fuck you. Don’t stay there getting fucked. Figure out a way to make money off of it if that’s what you like.”

After many stops and starts, Vanessa Blue took her grandparents’ advice and taught herself filmmaking and web design. She built her own editing studio from her earnings as a porn actress, exotic dancer, phone sex worker, fetish model, dominatrix, and private escort. She has directed over twenty hardcore videos and dozens of digital short films, which are distributed by major companies like Adam and Eve, Hustler, and Evil Angel’s Justin Slayer International. She also distributes them herself through her suite of members-only websites and privately owned video hosting sites like Clips4Sale.com. Though working to make a living outside of the corporate adult-entertainment industry’s influence, she remains very much tied to it. Vanessa is a compelling example of the possibilities and limits of pornography as a space where black women vie to gain greater control over their labor but are nonetheless cleaved to the industry’s inexorable capitalistic apparatus.

For Vanessa, control doesn’t just mean achieving independence from porn producers who make a great deal of money off of her work as a performer while also treating her as a disposable working body; it means being able to decide when, where, and how she wants to employ her labor. It means avoiding unethical directors and producers who create exploitative and unsafe work environments, and treat her with little care, interest, or respect. There is a less tangible aspect to gaining control over the means of production in porn work as well: authorship. To create the terms of one’s own performance and to catalyze one’s own fantasies into the sex scene—these dimensions of a more autonomous sexual labor allow Vanessa to see herself as much more empowered behind the camera.

Moving behind the camera, then, is a kind of mobility that allows sex workers greater agency to traverse the barriers placed around them in the porn business. By highlighting this maneuver we can reveal the material factors that tend to restrict and bind the movement of sex workers, as well as the material forces that might facilitate their ability to claim a role in the means of production.³ Scholarship on feminist pornography, which is notably an emerging field based on an emergent genre and practice, tends to focus on pornographic media texts that are produced and consumed in ways that push against or subvert gender and sexual normativity; are designed by and for women, transgender or genderqueer and queer people; and that destabilize the established

binary model of female objectification for male viewing pleasure. Yet this vibrant movement to make new and different kinds of porn imbued with feminist politics, which began in the 1980s and blossomed in the 2000s, is not separate from the marketplace or from the politics of sexual labor.

Feminist pornography is a for-profit enterprise that relies upon sex workers to manufacture its subversive fantasies and build its consumer base. And like mainstream (heterosexual) pornography, its structure, networks, and modes of representation are regulated and sanctioned by the State, dependent on access to new media technologies, and embedded in the flows of global capital. Though feminism seeks to dismantle structural and discursive exploitation and oppression of women and marginalized populations, our feminist praxis is not external to or untouched by hegemonic systems of domination. Theorizing a feminist pornography then means thinking about a dual process of transgression and restriction, for both representation and labor.

The maneuvers by sex workers like Vanessa Blue to re-appropriate their images for their own profit and politics are necessarily shaped by the stultifying power of race in pornography's structural and social relations. While all of porn's workers are subject to the disciplining force of racialized sexuality, even the idealized white female porn star, women of color are specifically devalued within a tiered system of racialized erotic capital.⁴ Within this hierarchy black bodies are some of the most degraded, and their degradation mobilizes the very fetishism driving their representations. According to one adult video director I overheard at the Adult Video News Adult Entertainment Expo, "black chicks are fucking skanks."⁵ Not only does black-cast pornography tend to be organized around a view of black sexual deviance and pathology—often a low-budget affair presenting pimps and players trolling the 'hood for hoes and hookers—but black porn actors tend to be paid rates half to three quarters of what white actors earn. In this way, black labor in porn mirrors the exploitation of black labor in "legitimate" arenas like service sector blue and pinkcollar jobs where black workers confront systemic inequality, prejudice, and occupational health risks. Hence, in order to understand the ways in which black pornographers like Vanessa Blue come to self-authorship and to make critical feminist interventions in the porn industry—and what is at stake in this important move—we must take seriously the overwhelming restrictions placed on black women's sexual agency as performers and producers of porn.

In vital ways, black women pornographers take on material constraints to enact expansive, and even radical, views of black sexuality against deeply fraught imaginings of black being. They work to alter the

terms by which black women's bodies are represented as simultaneously desirable and undesirable objects. Desirable for their supposed difference, exoticism, and sexual potency, black women are at the same time constructed as undesirable, as these very same constructions threaten governing notions of feminine sexuality, heteronormativity, and racial hierarchy. In an industry where excessive sexuality would seem to be an asset, black women's presumed hypersexuality ironically only undermines their value in the desire industries.⁶ Whether located in the mainstream heterosexual market of pornography or on its marginalized outer limits, the disabling discursive construction of black female sexuality provides an inescapable text that black women behind the camera must confront and grapple with as they strive to author a pornographic imaginary of and for themselves.

Resulting from the new ease and affordability of making and distributing pornography with digital technology, increasing numbers of black women performers such as Vanessa Blue, Diana DeVoe, and Damali XXXplosive Dares are getting into the production side of the industry. Building on the legacy of earlier black women who attempted to create a black women's sex cinema from inside the business, like Angel Kelly in the late 1980s, their work makes visible how pornographic authorship requires a new dimension of sexual labor. Not only are they becoming filmmakers in the traditional sense, they must fulfill a variety of roles: director, producer, editor, screenwriter, cinematographer, public relations agent, casting agent, acting coach, mentor, and distributor, to name a few. They must make themselves experts in new media technologies, ecommerce, and social networking in order to create, promote, and sell their films. Hence, calling them filmmakers, or even producers, does not capture the range of labor, expertise, or creativity involved in what they do.

Pornography created by black women attempts to expand their sexual representations, performances, and labor beyond the current limits of the pornography industry and the confines of pervading stereotypes.⁷ Vanessa's *Taking Memphis*, Diana's *Desperate Blackwives* series, and Damali's *Maneater: The Prelude* all display an interest in creating more dynamic roles for black actresses in porn. Their work helps us rethink pornography and feminist pornography as voluptuous sites for black women's intervention, imagination, and activism. Vanessa Blue's film work explores power reversals and role play while Diana DeVoe's large body of work tends to play with class by presenting black women as bored, conniving, upper-income housewives (just like the reality TV

stars they parody), or as cute and stylish hip hop generationers that obviously counter the image of the abject, low-class “ghetto ho.”

Damali Dares, who is just getting started as a filmmaker, explained to me how her own sense of feminism motivated her to direct, produce, and star in *Maneater: The Prelude*, a film about a sexy detective who uses her sexuality to catch men who cheat: “Some guys would say I’m a man hater and I’m not. I just hate ignorant people, guys, or other females who try to take advantage of people. I’ve always been an activist and I’m always standing up for the underdog. So [the idea for the film] kind of came from both me as a person and also wanting to do that superhero type, save the world, one female at a time. It was really about empowering females.”⁸ As Damali describes, she was sometimes construed as a “man hater” for being outspoken about inequality and injustice, particularly, as she related to me, against sexism, racism, and homophobia. It is notable then that she turned an established antifeminist attack, “man hater” into “man eater” for a film that went on to be nominated for a 2010 Feminist Porn Award. Casting herself as the detective heroine who catches “guys who victimize women,” and as the cuckolded wife who becomes empowered by learning the truth of her husband’s infidelity (she walks out on him in the climactic scene of confrontation), Damali sought to use the dual role to portray women in charge of their lives, and in the process showed a dynamic figuration of black female agency—one that employs the good girl/bad girl binary and dismantles it.

Black women filmmakers who are not adult actors, such as Shine Louise Houston (*The Crash Pad*, *Superfreak*, *Champion*), Nenna Feelmore Joiner (*Tight Places: A Drop of Color*, *Hella Brown*), Abiola Abrams a.k.a Venus Hottentot (*AfroDite Superstar*), and Tune (*Day Dreamin*), also constitute part of this new black women’s sex cinema. Shine’s and Nenna’s work, which has garnered significant attention from queer and transgender communities of color, draws on performers and representations traditionally excluded from both mainstream heterosexual and alternative lesbian porn. Their work, rather, emphasizes the sheer range of embodiments, attractions, acts, and desires possible between black women, other women of color, white people, and genderqueer and transgender persons—figurations absent in most porn. This new school of black women porn filmmakers creates visual texts that forcefully intervene in the existing landscape of pornographic media and that prioritize complex views of desire and relation over static notions of race and gender performance. It also upsets ideas about consumption and the notion that black pornography can only ever be offered up for someone else’s

fantasy—the purported white male gaze. Although their work addresses and appeals to a wide audience, these filmmakers create images that necessarily address other black women. As black women making pornography from their own points of view, they also show the diversity of viewpoints, positionalities, and gazes of black women as spectators.

Yet black women porn filmmakers—both performers-turned-directors and non-performers—face a number of constraints. In my research in black women's representations and labors in pornography, I interviewed dozens of black performers active in the business since the 1980s. These ethnographic interviews and encounters provided the critical insights—the voices of these women are vital sources of knowledge about what pornography means to and for black women. When I began my fieldwork as a graduate student at New York University in 2002 there was no work being done on the topic, and there were no black women working as directors. Presently there are far fewer black women active in directing and producing their own videos or video series than black men, who have benefited from the patronage of white men who own the major and minor production houses, and their work is not as well-financed. Unlike the predominantly white male directors, producers, and distributors who run the porn industry, or many of the white female directors who have innovated a veritable feminist pornography movement since the 1980s, black women do not have the capital, privilege, or influence to truly compete in the multibillion dollar trade of porn. They either must rely on traditional “boy's club” networks for production or distribution, or invent new modes to produce or distribute their work directly to consumers, which tend to limit their sales. A reason they have to become so good at many facets of making and marketing porn is that they often lack the resources to do otherwise. As Vanessa Blue explains, for black women sex workers, gaining access to the means of production often involves negotiating a set of barriers and exploitations that do not exist for others: “I see that there are no women of my skin tone [making porn], I see that there are very few white women doing it. But what's stopping us from doing it? The more I talked to people about it, the more I found out the truth. I had to fuck a few people to get some more information, and I did.” As a woman of color in the sex industry, no one takes you seriously, Vanessa told me, and they are certainly not willing to invest in you without some personal gain.

The phenomenon of black female porn makers must be evaluated in light of black sex workers' continued attempts to survive and succeed against tremendous barriers. Black women performers-turned-directors face an added stigma that other black women pornographers do not.

Because they continue to perform in their own films they are implicated as sex workers in ways that black women directors coming from film schools and other paths not related to the sex industry avoid. Directors like Vanessa Blue and Damali XXXPlosive Dares also maintain other kinds of ties to the sex business through their performer websites and exotic dancing. Thus producing porn is for them part of an overall strategy to extend their professional persona into a lucrative brand, one with many formats, audiences, and streams of income. Yet creating images constitutes an important intervention into porn's representational economy, which may be considered a kind of activism in addition to a savvy hustle.

Illicit eroticism⁹ is my term for conceptualizing how black women sex workers employ their mythic racialized hypersexuality in the sexual economy.¹⁰ By utilizing a sexuality intertwined with notions of deviance and pathology, I argue that black sex workers are positioned as sexual outlaws who convert forbidden and proscribed sexual desires, fantasies, and practices (including prostitution) into a form of defiant "play-labor."¹¹ I also want to assert that this paradigm for negotiating structural and discursive forces of sexualized racism might include an added vector of activist production. That is, illicit eroticism should also capture how black sex workers advocate for more just conditions in the sexual economy or greater personal autonomy when it comes to one's sexual choices and labor. Hence, illicit erotic activism would include making porn that undermines, or re-imagines, the status quo of black representational politics and organizes labor to improve conditions for sex workers. Illicit erotic activism can thus theorize the involvement, incorporation, and interventions of black women in feminist pornography and as feminist pornographers.

Vanessa Blue welcomed me with a warm and mischievous smile. I followed her, barefoot and dressed in a colorful, flowing sundress, into her home office. Explaining that she was in the middle of some important edits for a new project, Vanessa sat down at her desk with a confident grace, like the conductor of an orchestra, eminently sure the various parts of the symphony will coalesce, forming a masterpiece. The room was cluttered with equipment, yet organized. On her desk a Mac laptop was open to the movie editing software Final Cut Pro; notes, technical books, hard drives, and DVDs occupied the rest of the desk surface. A high definition digital video camera stood on a tripod at the center of the room aimed at a canopy bed swathed in red satin and covered in velvet pillows. This was where she shot many of her videos. As Vanessa said, she likes "watching people be free and enjoy themselves." She was drawn

to the idea of creating a space and environment where performers could take pleasure in their performances. "I knew I wanted to get behind the camera," she told me, "and I wanted to control the scene so that either I could get to fuck the way I wanted to fuck or produce the scenes that I knew this industry was missing."

"What is the porn industry missing?" I asked. "As a performer," Vanessa explained, "sitting on the set and watching the director leave the room and leave the cameraman to finish the scene, to direct and make those people fuck a certain way. . ." She shook her head in disgust. "I grew up with an appreciation for smut, and it broke my heart that smut was being made by people who really didn't care." Vanessa powerfully indicts the management of porn production, which has standardized the filming of sex scenes to the extent that actors often feel they are handled more as automatons than real people, and directed to have sex that is mechanical, perfunctory, and even unerotic. This kind of schema is thought necessary to provide the market with a constant stream of pornographic media options that satisfy every taste at the cheapest cost. It replicates exactly what sells and innovates only when other things sell better. This economy opens up the process to an uncaring and sometimes unethical regime for sex workers. "Fucking" the way she wanted would mean having more freedom to decide how sex should proceed; that the interaction would be more organic and dynamic, if not erotic. It meant *not* following the predictable porn formula, but following a new calculus from her own imagination. Vanessa Blue rejects the politics of disposability that turns porn's workers, like women of color working under the conditions of neoliberal capital around the world, into "a form of industrial waste" to be "discarded and replaced."¹²

"My fans will not want to hear this," she explained, "but when I was working, it was a means to an end, and the end was to direct." For Vanessa, acting was a way to transition from being a contracted worker in the uninspired milieu of gonzo porn, to being the creator of the image and the terms of sexual labor. Now Vanessa shoots films that she makes and she performs in roles that she designs. In the process of converting her labor from contracted to creative author, she presents black women's sexuality in ways that highlight this drive for authorship and self-determination. She aspires to eschew the framework of the stereotyped black sexuality dominant in most porn, yet much of her work remarks on blackness in ways that show its inextricable connection to systems of power. Vanessa exposes how black feminist porn must contend with race, as black female sexuality is sutured to racial histories that inform our contemporary fantasies and sexual economies.

In her adult feature (full-length narrative) films, like *Dark Confessions*, *Taking Memphis*, and *Black Reign*, Vanessa emphasizes the sexual autonomy of the female characters. Employing tactics that serve to humanize the performers and the characters, her camera closes in on and lingers on the faces, offering an embodiment beyond the often fractured “tits and ass” styling of so much porn. Vanessa creates a space for black eroticism and black subjectivity, centering themes of intimacy, mischief, power dynamics, and role-play. The presentation of cross and interracial intimacy pushes against the notion that relationships between black men and women, and black women and white men, are inherently alienating and objectifying.

In *Dark Confessions*, Vanessa employs the trope of the confession to elicit testimonials from couples about their fantasies, and as the box cover advertises, the fantasy is in “revealing their darkest desires.” Vanessa takes on the role of the confessor, sitting invisibly behind the camera as she draws out the sexual fantasies of five black male-female couples in this film, which is distributed by Adam and Eve, and marketed for a heterosexual-couples audience. Each interview, filmed in a medium range black-and-white shot, presents the couple sitting closely, holding or leaning on one another. The professional porn actors portray a familiarity and intimacy that is not usually present in most black-cast porn, where normally a series of sex acts are strung together with little plot, characterization, or opportunity for the actors to speak. Here the actors improvise from the outline of a script, yet their articulations are fluid as they play off one another to construct an image of a relationship that appears quite realistic. Vanessa probes them with questions: How did you meet? How’s the sex? What’s your fantasy? Like most reality-influenced genres, we, the spectators, become participants in this will to knowledge of sexual desire and invested in its actuation. Rather than re-produce regulatory regimes of power on the subject, the discourses of sex produced by the confessional in this film present black performances of intimate disclosure and relation.¹³

The fantasy of the female character in the first couple (played by Nyomi Banxxx) is to be interrogated—she wants her partner (played by Sean Michaels) to act like an FBI agent, dapper and smooth in a suit, with “minty fresh breath.” The scene has a film noir quality, a spare set with a spotlight projected on a mysterious-looking woman in a vintage 1940s hat and dress. The color is faded to almost black and white save for the red of her lips, and later, her panties. True to noir aesthetics, she’s smoking a cigarette, and the smoke plumes around her in the chiaroscuro of light and shadow reflected on the wall, perhaps mirroring the shad-

owy, forbidden nature of her desire. The fantasy here is the play of power through aggression and submission, mystery and impending action. Sean's debonair FBI agent seduces Nyomi's evasive femme fatale—her smoking, turning away, eye rolling, and resistance to his caresses and kisses build up the tension. With striking tenderness he holds her by the shoulders and kisses her cheeks and neck softly, and then as she finally returns the kiss, they move into an intense sex scene on top of the Federal Bureau of Investigation desk.

This refreshing intimacy does not mean, however, that Vanessa Blue avoids hardcore representations of dominance and alienation. In fact, she confronts power head-on and plays with it, especially in short films made for her website *FemmeDomX.com*. Using S/M fetishism—particularly the fantasy of black women dominating white men—she *queers* racial and gender hegemonies by exposing their very constructedness. By creating fantasies that explode assumptions about what constitutes proper pleasure and pain for the black body, she suggests that social power is changeable and that racialized sexuality can be toyed with for her own ends.

“Kink” is an under-explored arena of black sexual culture, and a technology of the self that is, if acknowledged in the public domain at all, seen as the epitome of deviant sexuality.¹⁴ The performances in *Femme Dom X* video shorts are very different from the sensuality of the feature film *Dark Confessions*. They involve ropes, chains, whips, torches, clamps, gags, harnesses, and other tools that evoke the historical, non-consensual mutilation and punishment of the black body under slavery, but that are used in this context to expose power as a terrain of (consensual) play in fantasy. Here, black dominatrixes, Vanessa included, torture white and black men by making them crawl, beg, and subject themselves to all manner of abuse, including by painting their faces with lipstick and otherwise emasculating them with taunting acts. Ever playful, Vanessa's *EbonyTickle.com* uses “tickle torture” to show how even—here, in the excruciating and taunting tickling of female performers tied to her bed—kink can be mediated in ways that create a permissible environment where black women sexual outlaws can be seen to play with the ever dangerous position of subordination and powerlessness. With the performance of subjection as submissives in *Ebony Tickle*, or of merciless domination as dominatrixes in *Femme Dom X*, black actresses in Vanessa's film work illuminate the significance of racialized kink fetishism as an important market in the pornography industry for black women looking to capitalize on the sexual scripts available for them.

Vanessa Blue's illicit erotic activism is about the use of what may

be generally understood as super-deviant sexualities to empower black women's sexual performances in pornography. For Vanessa, black women's performances of submissiveness or domination can be enjoyable acts, and ones that might encourage black women spectators to explore their own "darkest desires." And while her interest is not in presenting a narrative of racial progress, overthrowing patriarchy, or in making sexually emancipatory or pleasurable texts outside the marketplace, her intervention is, I argue, quite progressive. This work asks us to think about what we might learn from pornography's most marginalized: how our pleasure is indeed tied to historical realities of our pain. What does it mean that some of the most preferable work for black sex workers in porn—since fetish work often does not require penetrative sex, but the performance of a dominant or submissive role in non-penetrative sex acts—is tied up with these brutal legacies of sexual expropriation and sexual myth? Could taking pleasure in the most deviant articulations of black sexual deviance offer a radical tool to negotiate and transform how power acts on our bodies and communities? Black women's objectification in pornography has a long history, emerging from New World slavery as a pornographic, voyeuristic, sexual economy. Yet since the earliest photographic and film productions of sexually explicit material made for sale in a pornographic market of images, black models, and actresses could be seen to return the objectifying gaze, and gesture to their own subjective understandings as sex workers and as sexual subjects.¹⁵ If black women's sex cinema offers a new frontier to present the inextricable bind between sexual labor and sexual fantasy, the task is to explore it as a new kind of voice in pornography, one that is never divorced from the marketplace, but in fact, shines a light on the ways in which black women's sexualities are intimately linked with the project of authorship against, and in line with, inexorable myth.

Unconcerned with delineating what constitutes a positive or negative representation of black female sexuality, Vanessa Blue offers a view into how representations of black women's sexuality remain caught up in confining, binary scripts. This relentless binary, which is problematic for all women but especially so for women of color whose sexualities have been deployed as a primary mechanism of colonization, expropriation, and genocide, exposes the impossibility of rendering an authentic view of black women's sexualities in any media, let alone pornography. Black feminist pornography instead provides a space where black women performers can try on roles and stage imaginaries against expectations of decorum and normativity. This presents a powerful image for black women spectators, too. They might identify with the image and con-

nect it to their own sexual identities or experiences. Although there is little research on black women's consumption of pornography, knowing that a black woman created these films might foster a sense that they are invited to view a very different kind of image.

Nonetheless, a large segment of Vanessa Blue's work is not directed toward black women viewers, but instead white and black men. As a sex worker whose film work is tied to her professional persona and brand and who, in the absence of investment or opportunities to be hired to direct for major companies must launch her own "do-it-yourself" media—from short fetish videos to live webcam shows—she must necessarily address the primary market for black-oriented pornography. Like Diana DeVoe and Damali XXXPlosive Dares, Vanessa and other black women performers from the mainstream heterosexual porn industry make money by cultivating a white, black, and brown male fan base. Their authorship is always tied to the need for savvy self-promotion. This fact means that their work differs sharply from black women sex filmmakers who are not sex workers.

Abiola Abrams a.k.a. Venus Hottentot brought her background in film studies, art, and creative writing to her collaboration with pioneering feminist pornographer Candida Royalle for *AfroDite Superstar* (Femme Productions, 2007). Royalle's Femme Productions produced the film and guaranteed its audience would be women and couples interested in her quasi-softcore aesthetic. Coming to the film as an unknown entity in the mainstream or feminist porn world, Abrams was freer to use goddess imagery, a critique of hip hop's misogynist violence toward black women, and black feminist poetry throughout the film than if she had been a sex worker needing to assure fans would buy the film and keep her employed.¹⁶ In fact, she went into the project not seeing it as pornography for the purposes of titillation and masturbation, but as a "sex film" which would offer a powerful statement about the richness and complexity of black women's fantasy lives.¹⁷ But her reliance on established porn actors to carry the film, such as India, Mr. Marcus, and Justin Long, as well as the less experienced leading actress's performance (Simone Valentino), meant that the film would be marketed as a couples or woman-friendly porno even while it circulated as a form of feminist art. This fact underscores and expands upon Angela Carter's insistence that pornography "can never be art for art's sake. Honourably enough, it always has work to do."¹⁸

Black feminist and queer filmmakers coming from outside the industry produce for a different market and face a different set of expectations from their audiences than black performers-turned-producers of

porn. For the former, consumers are largely women, transgenders, and queer people looking to find authentic images of themselves and their sexual communities, representations lacking in most porn. This sense of authenticity is underscored by the fact that the sex workers employed for these films are part of these very same communities, often renowned performance artists and actors from the San Francisco Bay area, the queer porn San Fernando Valley. Both Shine Louise Houston and Nenna Joiner use queer people of color from their own circles of friends and collaborators in their films, and market, in part, to those same circles. Although the consumption of their work extends much farther afield, this community-based approach also presents a kind of political intervention. While black performers-turned-directors employ filmmaking as a facet, albeit politically charged, of their strategic sexual labor, black women filmmakers who are not performers do not engage illicit erotics in the same way. Rather than use their own sexualities for commoditized gains, they propel the sexualities of others to enact fantasies of their own design, fantasies that intervene in the narrowed landscape of possibilities for black female sexuality under racial capitalism.

But that's not to say that these black women auteurs do not deploy their own embodiments, and specifically the deviance attached to their black female bodies, in the pornoscape. Shine Louis Houston, for instance, launches her body into her texts in unexpected and subversive ways. In *Superfreak* she appears as the ghost of notoriously naughty funk singer Rick James, whose 1981 hit "Super Freak" describes "a very kinky girl, the kind you don't take home to mother . . ." Inhabiting James' spirit, Shine brings to life a trickster figure bent on turning one character after another into a "superfreak." Using her own body to set in motion the pleasure inducing, orgiastic scene, Shine moves from cultural producer (whose role is to represent or depict sex) to sexual laborer (whose role is to trade/on sex) to sexual intellectual (whose role is to critique sex labor and sex representations, as I do) to superfreak (who performs all of the above). This schema, offered by L.H. Stallings in her radical theory of black erotic rebellion called the "Politics of Hoin," opens up ways of thinking about black women pornographers as not so much divided by their varied interests in porn as united by a shared politics—porn as a site of possibility for black women's own intervention and critique.¹⁹

What does it mean to be a superfreak? For black women the politics of respectability has overwhelmed our ability to think of sex apart from the threat of harm to our womanhood and to our communities.²⁰ Through the prioritization of normative gender and sexual codes, behaviors, and relations we have sought to recuperate our *selves* from myths associated

with black sexual deviance, and the systemic violence attached to those myths. Pornography offers a site to see how those myths attach to fantasies and to labor arrangements, but also, to make visible the pleasures taken in the queerness of deviance.²¹ These pleasures are articulated by those who do sexual labor, those who depict sexual acts, those who offer intellectual critiques of them, and by those who do all of the above. In fact, these directors show the important overlaps between sex work and cultural production and cultural critique. Their body of work exposes the defiant sensibilities and subversive politics of black feminist pornographies as they enact a charged eroticism that is full of voluptuous potential.²²

This nascent cinema powerfully indicts the antiporn feminist viewpoint—if one is preoccupied by pornography's objectification of women one needs only to look to black women's pornographic filmmaking to see how women might make use of objectification as a technology of feminism. Claiming subjectivity, critiquing representation, constructing new sexual languages, and aiming for new forms of economic survival and mobility, the many agents of feminist pornography are at the vanguard of the feminist movement. A movement stultified in its reformist program of (neo)liberal rights struggles, it routinely leaves out the critical sexual/cultural workers who are trying to offer a revolutionary paradigm of gender and sexual rights and relations while at the same time entering into the means of production. Black feminist pornographers are on the front lines of what I see as one of the most exciting directions in modern feminism—one that can make plain (and explicit) the inextricability of racialized genders and sexualities to any new modes of capital and methodologies of creative self-fashioning we feminists undertake. Just as black feminists have challenged the mainstream feminist movement to be accountable to race, class, and nation as they act intersectionally and contingently with gender,²³ black women bring a special insight to feminist pornography: one person's fantasy is another person's work, and the workers have fantasies of their own.

Notes

1. Vanessa Blue, personal interview with the author, August 13, 2008. All quotes from Vanessa are drawn from the same interview.

2. I refer to my research interlocutors by their first name rather than their last name only to create consistency between those who employ last names in their professional personas and those who do not.

3. This aspect of my argument is informed by Jane Juffer's work on the domestication of and women's access to and uses of multiple forms of pornography and

erotica. However, she advocates for prioritizing “material transgression” and “material factors that restrict movement” across boundaries for they allow “the ability of women to literally enter into the means of production, to step across the threshold of an adult video store, to access an online sex toy shop, to buy a volume of literary erotica” over the feminist sex positive “valorization of individuals’ subversive abilities to appropriate texts,” whereas I see a dual focus on material and textual appropriation and constraint as productive for my purposes here. “There is No Place Like Home: Further Developments on the Domestic Front,” *More Dirty Pictures: Gender, Pornography and Power*, 2nd edition, edited by Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 56.

4. On erotic capital see: Adam Green, “The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach,” *Sociological Theory* 26, no. 1 (2008): 25–50. Employing erotic capital to read hierarchies in the sex industry specifically see Siobhan Brooks, *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).

5. See my article: “Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 219–35.

6. “Desire industries” is drawn from Siobhan Brooks, *Unequal Desires*.

7. On black women’s representations in mainstream pornography see my forthcoming book *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women, Sex Work and Pornography* (forthcoming, Duke University Press, 2013). See also the cutting edge work of Jennifer Christine Nash, “The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography” (PhD diss., Harvard University, Cambridge, 2009) and Ariane Cruz, “Berries Bittersweet: Visual Representations of Black Female Sexuality in Contemporary American Pornography” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010).

8. Damali XXXPlosive Dares, personal interview with author, March 24, 2010.

9. See Mireille Miller-Young, “The Hip Hop Honeys + Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip Hop Pornography,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 261–92.

10. I use the term sexual economy drawn from the work Adrienne Davis, “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, eds. Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 103–27.

11. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 45–46.

12. Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

13. On the confessional as site for the production of sexual truth see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books 1990 [1978]).

14. Anne McClintock, “Maid to Order: Commercial Fetishism and Gender Power,” *Social Text* 37 (Winter 1993): 87–116. There is a paucity of research on black women or men and “kink” or BDSM, but a few popular articles and blog essays or interviews exist. See: Daisy Hernandez, “Playing with Race,” *Colorlines* magazine, December 21, 2004, http://colorlines.com/archives/2004/12/playing_with_race.html; Anna North, “When Prejudice is Sexy: Inside the Kinky World of Race-Play,” *Jezebel.com*, March 14, 2012, <http://jezebel.com/5868600/when-prejudice-is-sexy-inside-the-kinky-world-of-race+play>; Andrea Plaid, “Interview with the Perverted

Negress,” Racialicious.com, July 10, 2009, <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/07/10/interview-with-the-perverted-negress/>.

15. This is part of my argument in my larger work. See *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women, Sex Work and Pornography* (forthcoming, Duke University Press, 2013).

16. Abiola Abrams, personal interview with author, April 10, 2009.

17. Abiola Abrams, personal interview with author, April 10, 2009.

18. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London, Virago Press, 1979), 12.

19. L.H. Stallings, “Superfreak: Black Female Masculinity Spectacle/Spectator in Lesbian Pornography,” Paper presented at Race, Sex, Power: New Movements in Black and Latina/o Sexualities, University of Illinois, Chicago, April 2008.

20. On the “politics of respectability” see the classic work by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Related to respectability politics is black women’s “culture of dissemblance”—their strategies of masking, avoiding, and resistance against racialized sexual stereotyping. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995).

21. On deviance as a site of potential for black (sexual) politics see Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

22. Here I am thinking of L.H. Stallings, *‘Mutha’ is Half A Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2007).

23. On intersectionality see Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241.

Fucking Feminism



DYLAN RYAN

Dylan Ryan is a porn star, writer, social worker, performance artist, and self-professed gender and sexuality geek living in San Francisco, California. Dylan holds a double bachelors degree and recently completed a masters in social work from a Canadian university where she studied the rise of feminist pornography and the intersections between sex work and social work. A yoga instructor and amateur filmmaker in her spare time, Dylan hopes to continue her academic career and to become Dylan Ryan, PhD.

In 2004, I was working at a popular sex toy retailer in San Francisco. Twenty-three years old, I was a recent graduate from a state university where I had studied English Literature and flung myself head-first into the eclectic and radically open-minded culture of my adopted city. Working at Good Vibrations, I was surrounded by sexuality, from sex toys to fellow employees who were educated and articulate about sex. The shop had shelves of various kinds of porn films, available for rental and purchase. After six months, I had consumed a fair amount of porn and was used to talking about it with my colleagues and customers. Looking back on that time, I recall watching porn and thinking that I had something to offer to it. With very few exceptions, the porn I had seen felt empty, inauthentic, and not representative of my sexuality and the kind of sex I was having. I honestly thought that I could change the movies for the better.

Many women give up on porn after one or more times out of a sense of alienation, revulsion, lack of arousal, shame, or any mix of these emotions. In the large majority of porn films, “particular female aesthetics are promoted: female actors often have long hair, are thin, often Caucasian, between their teens and thirties, have breast implants and wear high heels and plenty of make-up.”¹ This “ideal” of femaleness and femininity doesn’t fit the broad spectrum of bodies and identities of “real”

women, a disjuncture that reinforces women's alienation from pornographic images. It is not hard, given this, to see why many women, like myself, would not only not identify with women in porn but feel that they fall short by comparison. Adding body dysmorphia to all the other complicated intersections between women and pornography—including preexisting ideas about performer agency, choice, and social shame—the resulting experience could complicate a woman's interaction with porn so as to adversely affect her self-image.²

My engagement with porn was not one challenged by shame. I respected the women who I saw in the films and had little to no preconceived judgments about them, but I would find myself critiquing them as performers and considering what I would do differently and better. I had experienced sex in my personal life as a mostly positive, enjoyable, and liberating experience. I wanted to see that experience in the porn I was consuming. Like many female viewers, I had difficulty relating to the women in these films and their sexual presentations. Their bodies looked different from mine, and they seemed to embody a sexuality that was foreign to me, one of extreme femininity: vulnerable but hypersexual, passive but sexually desiring, ready for any sex act but without the impetus to make it happen. It seemed as if sex was happening “to” these women rather than with them or because of their choices or motivations. I didn't imagine that the actresses hated having sex, but rather that they were performing in a venue that discouraged their personal expression. I wanted to know what they looked like when they had sex in their real lives, and I wanted to see *that* onscreen.

In addition to mainstream porn, I was exposed to images of some of the scions of feminist pornography including Annie Sprinkle and Nina Hartley. I watched Nina Hartley's films and felt admiration for her clear and frank way of talking about sex. I loved that she was completely present and aware of herself and her presentation. The films *Nina*, *Annie*, and others made represented a sexuality that was open, honest, and without shame; they showcased sex that was fun and consensual. They had a sexual agency that I found arousing. It was the first time that I saw sex that resonated with me and that I wanted to emulate. Even with these films though, I still had issues with the bodies: the differences between theirs and mine. I couldn't relate to the curvaceous body type of Nina Hartley or Annie Sprinkle. At five-feet-ten and 145 pounds, I have been athletic and sinewy for most of my adult life. My breasts are small A cups, and my look is often more androgynous than girly. Like many women, I experienced the simultaneous intrigue and revulsion that can

accompany pornographic film watching³: of being simultaneously captivated and repulsed by the performers as they embody stereotypical female “beauty” and “perfection.”

While I was slowly constructing my own ideas about what porn should be, I discussed my thoughts with my sex-wise coworkers at Good Vibrations. One coworker in particular, Shine Louise Houston, was always available and interested in my thoughts on porn, as she had some pretty exciting thoughts of her own. When I talked about the kind of porn I wanted to *see*, she talked about the kind of porn she wanted to *make*. She talked with fervor about what she thought was hot and erotic and what her films would look like. Her dream was to direct sex scenes that were “authentic,” a term that we discussed quite a bit. I was taken with her dream and with her enthusiasm but also the fluidity of her ideas: forward thinking, diverse, and edgy, like mine. On a work break one day, I offhandedly said that should her dream ever come to fruition, I would star in her first film. I meant it, though I doubted that I would ever have to make good on such a promise. She left her job at the sex shop soon after that conversation. Over the course of the next year, I only heard about her in passing from mutual friends. Then I got a phone call from Shine. As it turned out, during that year, she was working on manifesting the adult film empire that would ultimately change my life.

She asked me if I was ready to star in her film. She had gotten money together to finance her first movie and was I still interested? Yes, I was. And I was terribly curious. I spent the next two months preparing myself as best I could for what I imagined I would experience. To say I was nervous would be a huge understatement: when I walked in the door to the San Francisco apartment that was serving as the set, I was shaking all over. I had tweezed, primped, self-tanned and done just about everything I could to feel good naked. Though I knew I was there to be myself and give good, hot sex, I still feared that I wasn’t “porn” enough and couldn’t quite shake the images of toned, big-breasted bodies moaning and fucking in some impossible position on a pleather couch. I wanted people to think I was hot. I wanted to feel hot.

Luckily, Shine was great at making her performers feel comfortable. I snacked and chatted and before we began the actual scene, she and I, along with my two fellow scene-mates, blocked out what we would do and where we would do it. The two people I would be having sex with were also first timers and our collective nervousness broke the ice. By the time the actual sex began, I was chagrined to find out that it was all far less sexy than I had imagined. We started and stopped a lot. My

makeup and hair wilted under the hot lights and warm, misty air—the result of so many people crammed into a little room. But, thankfully, no one expected me to give extreme fake moans. I understood that I could be as into it as I felt like being. If something didn't feel good, I could speak up and we would all move things around; no one was judging me, and everyone was as enthusiastic about what we were creating. Filming the sex was a challenge. Most “real life” sex doesn't have a camera person recording all the juicy bits, so one need not worry about the angles the camera is able to capture; there is no concern about “opening up” and making sure that a camera can fit into the tight spots. It's hard to feel like you're truly just having a sexual experience with a stranger when there are seven other people in the room and everyone is laughing about your having just kicked the main cameraman in the head. It was an “aha” moment as I realized why porn was full of so many contorted positions: the camera needed to see everything, so the rest of the bodies had to get out of the way. I have since watched the outtakes and behind the scenes from that first shoot many times. Each time, I am struck by how much hilarity there was. We, the performers, were naked, brand new to porn, and trying our very best to be sexy, yet we were angling arms and legs behind heads and up on apple boxes, feet being held off camera by a production assistant who was trying not to laugh. But that day, I felt like I was jumping headfirst into something unknown. For all my trepidation, I was, as I had hoped, authentic to my sexuality. I came away from that first experience with a positive feeling about the possibilities of pornographic performance in my life. A door had been opened, and I saw future opportunities that I found intriguing and exciting.

I don't imagine that choosing to perform in porn is right for everyone, but it turned out to be great for me. That first shoot engaged my exhibitionist streak. I liked the performance and how I felt sexually embodied and in control of my representation. It was not a manipulation and I was not duped; I chose how to be, what to show, what to do. It was as if I was sharing with the world my sexual best— those specific moments of sex when I felt good about my body and my most sexy. I had shown a woman at her most strong and confident. It felt good. My greatest hope was that some woman, somewhere, would see it and think, “She looks like she is having so much fun, I bet I could too.”

Critical praise for Shine's film *The Crash Pad* solidified my feeling that I had done something different in the world of pornography. Though I didn't know it at the time, *The Crash Pad* would be lauded as the hallmark of a new kind of pornography called “feminist.”

Returning to the subject of authenticity, I will begin by saying that it is a thorny but necessary topic when talking about porn. Webster's dictionary defines authentic as: "not false or copied, genuine. Entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience." When Shine and I first talked, we both believed that the majority of mainstream porn was inauthentic and not in agreement with what we knew to be true of our sexualities and the sexualities of those around us. "Authenticity" took on a somewhat mythological quality and became the Holy Grail in our vision for pornographic filmmaking: if we could achieve it, we truly would have transcended the existing constraints of the known porn world. We considered authentic porn our goal. Even now, this far into my porn career, I still reference the concept of authenticity as a sizeable part of my rationale for the porn that I make. It is a term that I use frequently to explain my position and identity as a porn performer. By situating myself inside my understanding of authenticity and explaining that to interviewers and interrogators, I also protect myself from some of the criticism that dogs other porn performers. Of course, what is "authentic" varies among individuals. When I say I'm making authentic porn, it means I prioritize my sexuality, which has allowed me a much less-criticized position than a female performer who may not have thought as much about authenticity in sexual representation.

It would be relatively easy for me to create an "us vs. them" view of porn, placing myself squarely on the intellectualized and thusly superior side, while putting other actresses and porn makers on the opposite side. Given my criticisms of mainstream porn, I could do that readily and in many instances make a case for myself, but I don't. Almost as soon as I touted myself as new and different, feminist film watchers leveled one of my very own critiques at me: they said I embodied a traditionally beautiful body type like those in mainstream porn. I am thin and Caucasian and even if inadvertently, I was perpetuating the very entrenched porn stereotype of the ideal white female form. As a woman who has always felt like the antithesis of the ultimate female beauty, that accusation made me uncomfortable but was unfortunately undeniable. When I began in the porn business, I wanted to shatter physical stereotypes, but, over time, I have realized that though I may feel non-normative, I am not that far left of the norm. Personal experience has shown me that while my "look" is not appealing to every filmmaker, it is much more accepted than women who are not white, not thin, or not conventionally attractive. It is a privilege that I have been forced to acknowledge and one that is not always easy to accept. How can I claim an alternative and mar-

ginalized position while my own body, gender presentation, and beauty aesthetic reinforce stereotypes for some viewers?

I struggle to blaze a trail for women while accepting my own whiteness and privilege. I “get” to be in porn, to raise my conceptual fist to the mainstream because I am close enough to the mainstream to even be let inside in the first place. This has been a bitter pill to swallow, but it reminds me that the deeper work of change to the representation of women in porn has to occur beyond me. It will come when we have greater inclusion of women of all body types, ages, and ethnicities in porn to counter the dominant imagery. I have attempted to demonstrate that belief and that need for change whenever possible. Part of how I create authentic images that reflect my queer sexuality is to work with people I’m attracted to—people who identify along a broad spectrum of genders, sexualities, and backgrounds. In showing what my sex looks like, I have been lucky enough to be a part of showing the sex of these individuals, who defy societal norms. Whether the porn we make together is consciously subversive or if it’s solely sexy, fun, and performative, I hope it accomplishes my goals: to bring more authentic sexualities to porn, to change the images that dominate porn, and to transform what people think porn is. A large part of my body of work (more than two hundred scenes to date) reflects the spirit of that first film: queer and defiant on several fronts.

Recasting the dominant images of porn is one of the main goals defined and championed by the adult-film trailblazers who have come before me, such as the self-described feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino. She defines feminist pornography as porn that includes a fair and ethical process, safe working conditions, collaboration with performers, positive representations, three-dimensional human beings, pleasure and orgasms for everyone, not just men, responses to dominant images, and the creation of new ones. Taormino’s definition includes the major themes of what constitutes a pornographic movie and to hers I would add, as my work has championed, the inclusion of different bodies and people of varying genders.

After *The Crash Pad* came out, Shine’s work garnered a reputation for being inclusive (showing gender fluidity, people of color, BDSM) and community oriented. I was performing regularly for Shine at this point and somewhat unknowingly became a part of the growing wave of new queer and feminist porn. In late 2007, an interviewer asked me to share my thoughts on whether I thought the emerging genre was feminist. I maintained that it wasn’t about feminism so much as it was about women:

I think that depends on what your definition of “feminist” is. I think a broad definition for people can be “woman focused,” and is this porn that? For sure. For others though, “feminist” can have an entirely different definition and for some feminists, pornography is exploitative no matter how or for whom it’s made. So it depends.

I recall feeling like I wanted to distance myself from feminism; though I was excited that the feminist porn genre, and queer porn especially, was getting press for being positive, I did not want to identify myself that way. I came from a generation of young women who learned about the feminism of the past, one that primarily did not support pornography, pornographic performance, and women being pornographers. I had taken women’s studies classes where we read Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, and about the male gaze and the notion that women were powerless in the patriarchal dynamics that defined their world. I realize now that I believed that the perspectives of antiporn feminists represented the pervasive view among all feminists. I internalized their negative rhetoric, and it affected how I thought about the work I was doing. My starting assumption was that the majority of people—especially women—would look down on me for the work I did. When asked if I thought I was a feminist or if the work that I was doing was feminist, I immediately responded “no” because my paradigm was that it couldn’t really be. It took a few years and getting to know many different people, both feminists and not, to change that perspective for me.

When I look at past critiques of me and of the porn I made, I realize that the memory I have of any direct criticism is, in fact, incorrect. In my mind, I was certain that out in the ether feminists were pointing fingers at me and adding my face to the canon of warped women who had been conceptually and physically enslaved by porn. Though I could not find any specific evidence of that, I still imagined that anyone who identified as feminist would be disapproving and hypercritical.

The idea of choice, in addition to authenticity, was a common theme I discussed with interviewers when they hinted at or asked directly about the stigma of my profession. “Do I feel like a lot of pornography is made with the male gaze, made to objectify women, to pervert feminine sexuality into something that is only for men and for their consumption? Totally. . . . I am very lucky that I don’t feel like I have made films or been involved in things that have only had that objective. I don’t feel like I have ever been treated that way.”

In this interview, I respond directly to the common critiques of porn by acknowledging that porn can oppress and objectify women, even if it

does not always have that objective or result in that experience for the performer. These internalized critiques, and my anticipation of them, has influenced how I understand myself as a sex worker in the world. While I know that I feel good about what I am doing and do not experience coercion in my sex work, it can be difficult to communicate that to others. It can also be difficult to express my personal belief that a woman has the right to engage in consensual objectifying activities without shame. Looking back on interviews I gave in the past, I see how my responses have evolved. I became more aware of what kind of career I was crafting for myself in the porn industry, and I became more comfortable with articulating that to people. My initial ideals about my role in porn slowly transformed into what I *actually* did in porn. Porn has been a positive choice for me. It is no longer something I think *will* be good for me, it is something I can say *has been* empowering and strengthening rather than oppressive and denigrating.

I did not fully identify as a feminist until the spring of 2009. As I sat in my seat at the Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto, I felt ecstatic. I was surrounded by friends and loved ones, people in the industry whom I had worked with, people I respected deeply. I watched as my favorite producers, directors, and performers were honored with awards. I was so proud of each of them, especially Shine Louise Houston, the person who gave me my start in the industry. While I saw each of them as feminist pornographers, I had yet to place myself in the same category. I saw that what we had in common was our desire to make pornography that broke boundaries of tradition and showed authentic, empowered sex. I thought we had many things in common but I didn't think that all our commonalities existed under the heading of feminist. And then my name was called from the stage. In a highly surreal moment, I staggered on stage to receive my award for Heartthrob of the Year. It was at some point in those next few moments, on stage in front of hundreds that I came to see myself as so many others had already: I performed in feminist porn, I was a feminist porn performer. I was a feminist. In all those years of crafting my work to represent empowerment, awareness, positive female sexuality, women's choice, I was representing feminist ideals about sex. After years of believing that all or most feminists disapproved of what I was doing with my life, it took a moment on a stage beneath a bright spotlight to realize that many feminists not only approved of, but appreciated, what I was doing. It was also the moment I realized I had been setting myself up, through all my choices, to be seen that way—as a feminist porn performer.

Notes

1. Marilyn Corsianos, "Mainstream Pornography and 'Women': Questioning Sexual Agency," *Critical Sociology* 33 (September 2007): 865.
2. Dawn H. Currie, "Decoding Femininity: Advertisements and Their Teenage Readers," *Gender and Society* 11, no. 4 (1997): 453–77; Petra M. Boynton, "Is That Supposed to be Sexy? Women Discuss Women in Top Shelf Magazines," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 9 (1999): 91–105.
3. Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* (New York: Feminist Press, 2010).

Queer Feminist Pigs: A Spectator's Manifesta



JANE WARD

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Given that I am a feminist dyke and a professor of women's studies, I recognize that it is a bit of a cliché to say that I am ambivalent about porn. Academics are arguably ambivalent about everything, and most feminists are keenly aware of the gendered and racialized forms of violence and exploitation that undergird much of the adult film industry, even as they oppose censorship, support sex workers' rights, and enjoy the porn they enjoy. Most queer feminists I know, myself included, also make sexual self-determination and the pursuit of our own orgasms the highest goal when it comes to engaging porn. Lucky are those whose arousal results from homegrown and independently produced feminist porn cast with gender-variant people of various races, body sizes, and abilities. But for some of us, mainstream porn—for all of its sexist and racist tropes and questionable labor practices—still casts its spell.

What does it mean to have a queer feminist relationship to porn? Most efforts to answer this question presume that the answer lies in the means of production (Are films produced by and for women or queers? How are performers treated and compensated? Are all sex acts safe and consensual?) or in the visual content of adult films themselves (Are we viewing genuine orgasms? What kind of bodies, desires, and subjectivities appear? Is the film directed and shot in a way that invites a queer and/or feminist gaze?).

Consider, for instance, this excerpt from one queer kid's inspiring ode to queer porn, which has gone viral on the (queer) Internet and takes the form of a cover of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way":

Porn This Way Lyrics¹

It doesn't matter if you love hir, or capital H-I-R
 Just turn that volume up and watch queer porn, baby.
 Society told me when I was young

about various normative sexual scripts

I rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
 And then tore those scripts to bits

There's nothing wrong with wanting what you want

You know desire is a social construct

So when the lights are on, the cameras rolling

That's when we all start getting fucked
 It's beautiful when you say, "Can I touch you there?" "Yes you may!"
 We're on the right track to make some hot queer porn today
 Don't eroticize bodies of color
 Respectfully eroticize one another
 We're on the right track to make some hot queer porn today

Oh there are so many ways to make queer porn worthy of praise
 Let's make some hot queer porn today

You're not an object—you are the subject
 You're not an object—you are the subject
 You're not an object—you are the subject
 You are!

Let every lick melt heteropatriarchy
 Every bite—right into white supremacy
 Porn that humanizes is so hot, you'll want that shit on DVD
 Having the sex you want is not a sin
 Believe capital H-I-R
 Your body is your own so you can say
 What really, really turns you on . . .

I like porn this way! Queer porn this way! We're on the right track now
 let's queer porn today!

This creative reworking of Gaga's song exemplifies some of the persistent tensions and challenges involved in efforts to "queer porn today." On the one hand, there's nothing wrong with wanting what you want because desire is socially constructed (queer principle number one). This principle has arguably resulted in the dominance of a kind of queer laissez-faire position on porn; no card carrying queer radical is going to tell anyone what should or shouldn't get her off. And yet, on the other hand, we recognize that not all porn is created equal, and the differences *matter*. We must, for feminist reasons if not for queer ones, distinguish between the impact of films that capitalize on heteronormative rape culture (that is, films marketed to older straight men who fantasize about raping teen girls), for instance, and those marketed to dykes who want to watch bald girls fucking in their San Francisco crash pad. Indeed, the porn most worthy of queer praise is respectful and humanizing, though perhaps not in wholly predictable ways. It eroticizes bodies of color, but not in a problematically fetishistic way. It melts heteropatriarchy. It takes a bite out of white supremacy. It is subjectifying, it believes in the revolutionary power of genderqueerness, and it prays at the altar of capital H-I-R. Taken together, these aims arguably constitute queer/feminist/antiracist principle number two.

Agreed. I am on board with this vision. To the extent that such porn exists, it *is* the porn worthy of our praise. But here's the rub: for many queers, it isn't the porn that gets us off.

Queer viewers have long found queer meaning and taken queer pleasure in mainstream media. Perhaps no one has more developed skills in this arena than slash writers, for instance, who take media not intended to have queer meaning and rewrite or reanimate it with queer themes and images. But many of us are far too lazy for this level of interactivity with media, and explicit porn—already so packed with sex acts and so thin on character development—doesn't easily lend itself to this kind of queer reinscription.

And herein lies my ambivalence. We need a clearer set of guidelines about *queer pornographic spectatorship*, or a means of "queering" porn that doesn't rely on filmmakers to deliver to us imagery already stamped with the queer seal of approval, and that doesn't automatically equate queer viewers with queer viewing. Does it matter *how* we view? How, precisely, do we watch mainstream porn *queerly* (other than simply being queer ourselves, or having queer sex during or after our viewing)? Can we watch sexist porn and still have feminist orgasms? In sum, does it matter how we relate to our less-than-praise-worthy desires, or does the "anything that gets you off" principle ultimately trump everything else?

Feminist Subjects, Queer Pigs: My Argument with Ariel Levy

In the acclaimed book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, lesbian feminist writer Ariel Levy persuasively warns against the increasing commodification of women's sexuality, citing everything from women's leadership in the sex industry (think Christie Hefner, the CEO of *Playboy*) to the porn-star aspirations of middle-school girls to the astronomical rise in breast enlargement surgeries and striptease aerobics to the emergence of sex-crazy queer bois. What Levy finds especially troubling about the "raunch culture" of today is that young women not only enthusiastically participate in and promote it, but also seem to equate it with feminist liberation. According to Levy, the corporate media—from fashion magazines to television shows like *Sex and the City*—have duped young women into believing that feminism is passé and that sexual expression is now their most important contribution, their most exciting frontier.

In my women's studies classes, Levy's book has been an undeniably powerful teaching tool. Because most of my students are new to feminism, I spend several weeks simply drawing their attention to the ways that representations of girls and women almost always foreground feminine appearance and heterosexual desirability over all else. The examples in Levy's book are invaluable in this regard. And yet, her argument rests on a premise that I cannot get behind, namely that the vast majority of girls and women are suffering from false consciousness; they are victimized by a corporate media catering to men, and alienated from their authentic sexual desires. If this is true, so many questions remain, not the least of which is whether any sexuality can be truly "authentic," or uninfluenced by our cultural context. Given my uneasiness about Levy's logic, I was delighted when, in 2006, I found out that she would be speaking in Los Angeles about her book. She was guest lecturing in a queer studies class at the University of Southern California, and before I had a chance to ask any questions, other members of the audience offered up queer criticisms of the feminist authenticity imperative in Levy's analysis. Is there such a thing as sexuality unmediated by culture? And if so, who decides the content of this authentic, feminist sexuality? Lastly, how could Levy be so certain that raunch culture wasn't an expression of many women's genuine desires?

Levy responded by saying that while of course she didn't know anything about the sexual desires of individual women, she simply could not accept that so many women and girls naturally have the exact same raunchy desires as everyone else (the desire to emulate Paris Hilton, or

to drunkenly flash their boobs on camera and so forth). This was an interesting point, except that Levy didn't seem to be arguing for sexual *diversity* as much as for a mass movement toward feminist sexuality, a feminist sexuality she was unwilling to define. At this point, I asked her pointedly, "what *do* you want women to find sexy?" She laughed and responded that it wasn't for her to say. "But isn't this what's at stake here?" I asked. And then, frustrated with this level of abstraction, I couldn't help myself. I said: "Look, I *do* wish that I found lesbian feminist imagery more appealing, but often what I want to watch is raunchy porn. I feel very capable, though, of disidentifying with it. It does not determine my politics, or other things about my life. Still, are you suggesting that my sexuality is less feminist, or more damaged, than it should or could be?" Levy replied in a somewhat defensive tone, "I don't know. I'm not your therapist. You'd need to look into that yourself."

So there I was, a women's studies professor, being told that I needed therapy by the woman the *New York Post* has called "feminism's newest and most provocative voice." Of course it wasn't that I wanted Levy to authorize my pervy desires; instead, I truly wanted to know how Levy believed our generation should be defining feminist sexuality. Though she wouldn't be specific, what I take from her book and her talk is that we should relate to our attraction to raunchiness like we might relate to a pattern of dysfunctional relationships: no matter how attractive assholes are, at some point you need to rewire your desire in the direction of what's good for you. We need to get clean and sober.

At the end of the day, my exchange with Levy drew my attention to the persistent gulf between feminist and queer approaches to sexuality. While Levy might seem like something of a 1970s lesbian feminist throwback, her position shares much in common with that of seemingly more sex-positive, or porn-positive, feminist voices of our time. Ultimately, Levy is a champion of genuine female desire, and her dual focus on femaleness and genuineness is consistent with the aims of many feminist leaders in the sex industry (though the latter are far more certain than Levy that porn is an outlet for genuine female desire). For instance, according to the folks at Good for Her, the Toronto feminist sex shop that hosted the 2011 Feminist Porn Awards, feminist porn must meet one of the following criteria: "a woman must have been involved in the production, writing, or direction of the work; or the work must convey genuine female pleasure; or the piece must expand the boundaries of sexual representation and challenge mainstream porn stereotypes." Allison Lee, Good for Her's manager adds that, "Feminist porn is not necessarily directed by women or only aimed at women. But what femi-

nist porn does do is take women into account as viewers. . . . One of the things that is considered is whether it's something they think that women might enjoy."² In sum, feminist approaches to sexuality privilege women's genuine desires and experiences, but it does so without much critical reflection on who we think women are, and how they come to desire what they do.

In contrast, queer approaches to sexuality—at least those informed by queer theory—are not likely to take the gender binary or the pursuit of genuineness so seriously. As transgender theorists like Kate Bornstein and Jacob Hale have so beautifully illustrated, biological maleness and femaleness are hardly the most interesting or erotic ways to organize or represent sexuality. What a sad and boring state of affairs it would be if marketers could truly anticipate what “women might enjoy.” The beauty of queer desire is precisely that it is unpredictable, potentially unhinged from biological sex or even gender, and as such, difficult to commodify. A given viewer may have a vagina, but while watching porn, who knows what kind of subjectivities emerge (male? alien? robot? wolf?), or what kind of imagery this viewer might enjoy. Sure, market research may indicate that women do, in fact, have group preferences (for deeper plot narratives, close-ups of female orgasms, and so on), but even these “feminist” preferences have been marketed to us, and arguably mirror simplistic cultural constructions of femininity, such as the notion that women's sexuality is more mental or emotional than physical.

The recognition that gender and desire are socially constructed certainly doesn't mean that all porn is politically neutral, or that there's no need to reflect critically on what we consume. In my view, the first responsibility of all queer feminist pigs is that we take some time to observe our desire, and then think creatively about how our particular lust might serve our queer feminism. So, by way of example, let's start with mine . . .

My Piggish Desire: The Elephant Chain

For the past few years, I have been watching—and writing about—the genre of college reality porn, with focus on a series called *Shane's World: College Invasion*. In this immensely popular series of college reality porn, which *Rolling Stone* referred to as “the new sex ed,” professional female porn stars arrive at college fraternity parties and refuse to have sex until the frat boys have engaged in a series of feminizing and sexually intimate humiliation rituals with one another. The boys strip naked, put on pink bras and panties, “bob for tampons,” scream their assessments of their

friend's penises (for example, "Big fuckin' donkey dick! Big fuckin' donkey dick!"), and receive blowjobs from porn stars while standing side-by-side, surrounded by a circle of cheering male friends.

Intellectually speaking, what interests me about these films is the way they rely upon and promote the notion of homosexual *necessity*. The conceit of *College Invasion*—and of fraternity hazing rituals more generally—is that boys have no choice but to wear pink panties, to put their fingers in each others' anuses, or to eat cookies covered in their friends' cum.³ They *simply must* do these things because the stakes are too high. If they don't, they might not get to have sex with a porn star, or in the case of hazing, they might not be admitted to their fraternity of choice. Of course, this necessity is manufactured by the boys themselves, and then capitalized upon by the producers of college reality porn. *College Invasion* might just as well cut to the sex between porn stars and frat boys and bypass the homoerotic contests and rituals, but this is not what happens. Feminization and homosexual contact are precisely what makes the films a "realistic" portrayal of fraternity life, and therefore, precisely what viewers wish to see.

It turns out that I don't have only an intellectual interest in these scenarios; I think they're hot. I am impressed by the imagination required to manufacture them, the complex rules that structure them, and the performative and ritualistic way that straight men touch one another's bodies or order others to do so. One of my favorites is a fairly elaborate and notorious fraternity hazing ritual called the Elephant Chain, wherein participants are required to strip naked and stand in a circular formation, with one thumb in their mouth and the other in the anus of the young man in front of them. Like circus elephants connected by tail and trunk, and ogled by human spectators, they walked slowly in a circle, linked thumb to anus, while older members of the fraternity watch and cheer.

I am not particularly interested in psychoanalyzing why anyone desires what they do; this endeavor is almost always essentialist and pathologizing (which is why Ariel Levy's comments about my need for psychotherapy left me cold). But I will say this: these scenes remind me of the kind of sexual games my friends and I played as young girls (starting around seven or eight years old), before any of us knew what sex would later be. In the absence of a coherent and normative conceptualization of sex, we cobbled together the gendered and sexual tropes familiar to us as kids. We crafted highly detailed narratives about ourselves (we were beautiful fairies, rebellious teenagers, wealthy movie stars, doctors, and patients), and our circumstances (the various events that presumably

resulted in the *need*—whether we liked it or not—to reveal/touch/kiss certain body parts). We knew we were playing. We invented scenes. They had to be negotiated. There were rules. People were bossy. Body parts were gross. But we touched each other anyway.

One of the things I love about homosexual encounters between adult heterosexuals is that they constitute a unique erotic domain characterized by many of the features of childhood sexuality. This is not because it is a “childish” act for adult heterosexuals to have sex with one another, or because straight men in fraternities (or military barracks, prisons, and so forth) are less evolved or self-aware than men in other contexts, or for any other reasons that might stem from such a simplistic and moralizing reading of sexuality. Instead, it is because homosexual sex enacted by heterosexuals—like sex between children—occupies a liminal space within sexual relations, one that sits outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and is sometimes barely perceptible as sex. Like childhood sex, it goes by many other names: experimentation, accident, friendship, joke, playing around, and so on. Participants must painstakingly avoid being mistaken as sincere homosexuals by demonstrating that the sexual encounter is something other than sex, and in many cases, they do this by agreeing that the encounter was *compelled* by others (such as older fraternity brothers) or by circumstances that left them little choice (such as the dire need to get into a particular fraternity). Avoiding homosexual meaning requires that heterosexuals must get really creative. And this heterosexual creativity speaks to my queerness, even as it is arguably motivated by heteronormativity, or a seemingly compulsive need to repudiate gayness.

College reality porn is not queer or feminist porn. It is not porn worthy of queer praise. But even within this less-than-liberating genre we can find ideas, gestures, and scenes that unintentionally provide fodder for queer orgasms, and opportunities for queer reflection. All of us can take queer meaning from mainstream, raunchy, and typically sexist and homophobic porn. We can actively disidentify with its intended meaning or impact, even as we are deeply critical of the oppressive systems that produce a demand for such images or that encourage the most normative readings of them.

If the Buddha Watched Porn

To return to the vision of “Porn This Way!,” the song I discuss at the outset of this essay, we might ask how watching or making porn can actually “change the world”? Certainly it cannot do so in isolation, but working

with and on porn—the representational branch of the erotic—is a vital part of the effort to have a creative, humane, and loving relationship to sexualities, rather than one that does violence. At the very least, our relationship to porn must be one that strives to cause no further harm, aims to delink our sexual longings from various systems of oppression, and stays in touch with our queer and feminist impulses. This is a practice that we can, indeed we must, be able to do despite the content of the images provided to us.

I am a lazy and inconsistent follower of American Buddhism, but I have read enough to know that one of the goals articulated within its framework is to observe our less than ideal behaviors—addiction, escape, distraction, etc.—with curiosity and compassion. We are surrounded by less-than-ideal circumstances—such as, for instance, bad or problematic porn—that trigger our less-than-ideal responses. This, according to many Buddhist teachers, is the human condition. The challenge is to avoid getting wound up with shame and judgment (for example, “This is disgusting and offensive. I can’t believe I am aroused by it.”) or justification (for example, “This is disgusting and offensive, which actually makes it super queer, transgressive, liberating, and cooler than what everyone else likes.”).

Some people dedicate their lives to Buddhism by living as monks or nuns, and I believe this is a praiseworthy choice. But most of us plod along, working with the murkiness of our non-monastic lives. Similarly, some people make beautiful queer and feminist porn that is attentive to various modes of representation and desire, or they become its devout consumers. But many of us just keep going back to the mess of heteronormative, male-centric images of tits and ass. Sometimes we mindlessly consume it, but sometimes—on our better days—we *mindfully* consume it, noting what it does and does not do for us, how we respond, what stories we tell about its meaning and ours in relation to it.

A Queer Feminist Pig’s Manifesta

1. I get off on porn smartly and mindfully. I am interested in my desire. I do not presume it is natural, static, or predictable. I observe its form and shape, not because I want to know how my childhood experiences or social conditioning might have determined it beyond my control, but because I want to know its relationship to my happiness, my suffering, my creativity, and my politics.

2. **I do not take my “self” as a viewer too seriously.** I do not feel I need to conform to any expectation—on the part of marketers, my communities, or myself—about what “people like me,” or with my body parts, should desire. I can, with some effort, practice erotic egolessness and/or performativity by exploring the delicious potential of cross-identifications and non-identifications. In sum, I practice the *art* of spectatorship, identifying and disidentifying with the images made available to me.

3. **I am responsible for the impact of my sexual desires and sexual consumerism on others and myself.** I will be mindful of where and to whom I direct my gaze, with particular attention to matters of consent and dehumanization.

4. **I cultivate a private, internal space where I can honor and observe the complexity of my sexuality as it evolves.** Though I remain publicly accountable, I provide myself with moments of exploratory freedom, creative license, and orgasmic surprises. I let my sexuality take me off guard. I move into it, even when it scares me. I trust myself to work productively—queerly and feministly—with my desire.

5. **I praise those who aim to dismantle racism and melt heteropatriarchy with their art, their porn.** I am bored by normativity. I believe that sexuality breathes life into the revolution. I celebrate queer, antiracist, and feminist images that reflect the diverse reality of sexualities and bodies, and that serve as models for what our bodies can do and be.

Notes

1. “Gender Neutralizing: Porn This Way,” YouTube video, 3:46, posted by “debaser9779,” May 2, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj-l6cakhV8>. Note: The song includes additional lyrics I did not include in my excerpt here that critique Gaga’s liberal multiculturalism and biological essentialism.

2. Adam Polaski, “Feminist Porn For a Male Audience,” *The Good Men Project*, April 28, 2011, <http://goodmenproject.com/good-feed-blog/feminist-porn/>.

3. See Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

“Every time we fuck, we win”: The Public Sphere of Queer, Feminist, and Lesbian Porn as a (Safe) Space for Sexual Empowerment



INGRID RYBERG

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Launched in 2006, the Pornfilmfestival Berlin has become a central arena for the current queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture. Though the festival has hosted guests such as Candida Royalle and Shine Louise Houston and workshops on feminist porn and safer sex since its inception, the audience for the festival is quite mixed. When I attended the festival in October 2010, I had a deeply ambivalent experience. I went to see the film *Much More Pussy* by the French director Emilie Jouvét, one of the prominent figures in the current wave of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn in Europe and North America. *Much More Pussy* is the second film Jouvét made that documents the burlesque performance “The Queer X Show,” where a group of seven sex-radical women toured Europe in a minibus during the summer of 2009. While the first film *Too Much Pussy: Feminist Sluts in The Queer X Show* focuses on the performances and discussions among the seven women, the second film, *Much More Pussy*, focuses more on the sexual encounters that occurred during their tour. I had attended “The Queer X Show” when they performed in Stockholm in August 2009 and was excited to see what Jouvét had made of the footage documenting the tour.

During the screening something occurred that forced me to grapple with the simultaneous experience of pleasure and danger involved in

porn spectatorship for women. As I will discuss later, this incident made me powerfully aware of how there can be no simple equation between queer, feminist, and lesbian pornography and empowerment. In this article, I intend to unravel some of the issues at stake in queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture and struggles for sexual empowerment. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in European porn production and exhibition contexts, specifically the Pornfilmfestival Berlin screening of *Much More Pussy*. I argue that this film culture may act as both a *counter public* and an *intimate public* space for queer, feminist, and lesbian subjects, and that it is in the tensions and dynamic transactions between these notions of publicness that the potential for a safe space can be both located and undermined. Importantly, empowerment is not an issue of individual agency. Rather, it is an ongoing and collective process of negotiating the norms that both surround and incorporate us. I claim that this continuous, collective negotiation can potentially make queer, feminist, and lesbian pornography a safe space for sexual empowerment for women and queer people.

Claiming Public Space for Queer, Feminist, and Lesbian Sexual Discourse

“The Queer X Show” and the Pornfilmfestival Berlin are two examples of the contemporary queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture as it has emerged in Europe over the last decade. Other examples are the Post Porn Politics Symposium held in Berlin in October 2006 (hosting guests such as Annie Sprinkle), Paris Porn Film Fest launched in 2009, the performance collective Girls Who Like Porno in Barcelona (2003–2007), and the Swedish feminist porn collection *Dirty Diaries: Twelve Shorts of Feminist Porn* (Engberg, 2009), for which I directed the lesbian short *Phone Fuck* (Ryberg, 2009). The emergence of this film culture in Europe is closely related to and overlapping with North American examples such as the Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto (2006–) and the Good Vibrations Independent Erotic Film Festival in San Francisco (2005–). San Francisco-based filmmakers such as Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble, and Madison Young are frequent guests at the Pornfilmfestival Berlin and “The Queer X Show,” which gathers sex-radical women from France, Germany, and from the United States.

In the *Too Much Pussy* press release on Facebook, explicit reference was made to American “pro-sex” feminists such as Annie Sprinkle, Candida Royalle, and Carol Queen; it positioned the performers in “The

Queer X Show” as new actors in the same revolution to playfully affirm sexuality and reinvent new representations of desire and pleasure.¹ In the early 1980s, Sprinkle made *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, and Royale formed the production company Femme Productions, ushering in a new era of porn from the point of view of women. Lesbian sex videos also started to be produced by companies such as Fatale Media. Both Femme Productions and Fatale Media were examples of sex-radical activism in the then-ongoing, heated feminist debates known as the sex wars. In these debates, issues such as pornography, sadomasochism, and lesbian butch/femme roles became a dividing line between sex radicals and cultural feminists.² In cultural feminism, women’s sexuality was seen as radically different from male models of genital and penetrative sex.³ Lesbian porn challenged this framing of female sexuality as intimate, nurturing, and reciprocal, and celebrated sex roles and acts considered antifeminist and patriarchal (in the antiporn discourse) such as butch/femme, rough sex, and penetration with dildos.⁴ Lesbian porn also appropriated mainstream hardcore conventions like the money shot, the meat shot, and the principle of maximum visibility.⁵

The sex wars changed the feminist landscape for good, and it is a crucial context for understanding the contemporary feminist, queer, and lesbian porn film culture. But the story of the sex wars is also a story often told and, as argued by Clare Hemmings, forms part of a developmental narrative structuring the feminist past as decade specific, as a progression from the essentialist 1970s to a more refined understanding of differences in the 1990s and 2000s.⁶ In accordance with Hemmings’s call for a conceptualization of the feminist past “as a series of ongoing contests and relationships rather than a process of imagined linear displacement,” I propose a more nuanced understanding of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn.⁷ Focusing too much on the dividing line between cultural feminism and sex radicalism, one misses important overlaps, intertexts, notions, and features within this film culture. As Chris Straayer argues in her chronicling of lesbian sexual representations in film and video, the ideologies of both cultural feminism and “pro-sex” lesbians “frequently intersect in independent video,” where women’s struggle for sexual agency, self-definition, and empowerment prevails as a central concern.⁸

This film culture also builds on the second-wave feminist tradition of consciousness-raising groups as safe spaces for empowerment. These spaces were shaped by the idea that, through sharing and learning from one another’s experiences of oppression and explorations of one’s body

and sexuality, women become more self-confident and autonomous. Jane Gerhard contends that before second-wave radical feminism had fractured into different interests, groups, and sexual agendas during the 1970s, sexual pleasure was framed as the key to liberation and became synonymous with empowerment and self-determination.⁹ The impulses of both antiporn critique and sex radicalism coexisted in radical feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s and "resulted in a productive moment of activism" where sexual pleasure was claimed as every woman's right.¹⁰ One example of this activism is the Boston Women's Health Collective classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Describing their experiences of empowerment in coming together and sharing and learning about their bodies, they write:

For us, body education is core education. Our bodies are the physical bases from which we move out into the world; ignorance, uncertainty—even, at worst, shame—about our physical selves create in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people that we could be.

As we managed to be more trusting with each other we found that talking about ourselves and our sexuality can be very liberating. . . . [W]ith each other's support, we have become more accepting of our sexuality, and we have begun to explore aspects of ourselves that we hadn't thought much about before. . . . We are learning to define our sexuality in our own terms. . . . Our sexuality is complex because it involves physical, psychological, emotional, and political factors.¹¹

Looking again at "The Queer X Show," it is possible to see how it inscribes itself into this second-wave feminist tradition of women's groups, consciousness-raising, and the politics of sexual pleasure. Moreover, in the two films about "The Queer X Show," the intimate dialogue and knowledge production within this group of women is central, evident also in their blog, where the performer Mad Kate wrote:

What I appreciate most about this tour so far is the privilege and comfort of being surrounded by incredibly wonderful queer women; our ability to have these amazing conversations and not to feel like any of my opinions or feelings are wrong or illegitimate.

I am familiar with a school of thought that believes sexual desire is superfluous, that these are the things that can and should be repressed and reconsidered, or that sexual freedom is luxury or even childish. But I can't agree; freedom to express one's self sexually

is tied into every freedom of expression of the body, from speech to basic needs like eating and sleeping. When we don't have the rope around us we suddenly realize just how much easier we can breathe.¹²

Like second-wave feminist activism around issues of sexual pleasure, the contemporary queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture constructs public arenas for feminist discourses on sexuality. Lynn Comella highlights how the NOW Conference on Female Sexuality in New York in 1973 anticipated the Barnard Conference in 1982 in “[creating] a public space for women to come together and talk openly about their sexuality at a time when women had few opportunities to do so.”¹³ As Jane Juffer points out, women's access to public discourses on sexuality, such as the masturbation discourse in feminist literature of the 1970s, altered the conditions for, not just material, but also mental access to their own bodies and sexual pleasure.¹⁴ Women's sexual organs, including the clitoris and cervix, menstruation, and masturbation, were celebrated in consciousness-raising groups and literature, as well as in the artwork of Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneemann and in the films by Barbara Hammer and Anne Severson.¹⁵ In her blog entry Mad Kate describes how the participants in the show, at an early stage of the tour, examine their cervixes together. In “The Queer X Show” the practice of cervix examination was also performed on stage by the sex educator and performer Sadie Lune, echoing both Annie Sprinkle's public cervix announcements in the 1990s, and the opening up of public discourse and space for feminist consciousness-raising around sexuality in the 1970s.

Such reclaiming of public space is also invoked in a number of the shorts in the Swedish feminist porn collection *Dirty Diaries*. For instance, in her short *Flasher Girl on Tour*, conceptual artist Joanna Rytel plays the role of a female exhibitionist who exposes herself in various public places in Paris, such as in the Metro. Wearing a strap-on vibrator that she controls with a remote, she also visits the red-light district Pigalle where she stalks and objectifies various men. In its attack on and appropriation of male dominated public sexualized spaces, Rytel's film ties in with a long-running tradition of feminist performance art and intervention in public spaces. *Flasher Girl on Tour* echoes, for instance, Valie Export's performance *Genital Panik* (1968), where Export exposed her genitals in a movie theater as a comment on women's role in cinema. In Åsa Sandzén's film *Dildoman*, an animation set in a stripclub, the female strippers subvert the action by using one of the male visitors—a

figure based on the former leader of the Swedish Christian Democratic Party, Alf Svensson—as a dildo. Similarly, Pella Kågerman's film *Body Contact*, a mockumentary about an amateur porn film shoot staged by two women and a man that they find on an Internet dating site, reclaims the sexualized public domain of the Internet. The man they pick up and invite is at first reluctant but eventually allows them to film the sex, performing what he believes are good porn positions (like "doggy style"). In all three films, male-dominated, sexualized public space is appropriated for women's sexual pleasure and gendered power relations are put into question.

Conditions of Access and Agency in the Sexualized Public Sphere

At the Pornfilmfestival Berlin 2010, I attended the screening of *Much More Pussy* with a female friend. Together, we settled down toward the front of the theater at the cinema Movimiento in the Kreuzberg district, the main location of the festival. The theater soon became crowded. Jouvét, as well as some of the women from the show, were also present. This was the first public screening of the film. A man sat down next to my friend and from the very start I noticed that the way he looked and smiled at her was too pushy and far from invited. My friend started to fidget, holding her arms tight around herself. I asked her if she wanted me to tell him to back off. She said, "No, it's okay."

Then the film started and I was absorbed by the force of the intimate interactions among the women in the film; by the affective intensity of their different experiences and thoughts on gender and sexuality that they share with each other and bring into sexual role-play and fantasy; and by the careful responsiveness and participative presence of Jouvét's camera. After the screening, as I left the theater, I realized that I had not noticed any more fidgeting by my friend. I did not get the chance to ask her about it then, but I hoped that it was not just that I had been completely overwhelmed by the film and unaware of what happened next to me. Perhaps the man stopped once the film started. Perhaps he lost his rude courage once confronted with the fierce women in the film, with the control they possessed over their own sexualities and bodies. This was the fantasy I wanted to believe and chose to take with me when I returned to Sweden. Because if, as the film's punk soundtrack repeatedly declares, quoting the queer activist group Queer Nations' 1990 manifesto: "every time we fuck, we win"—this man should not. Or, was

this man in fact the symbolic “winner” of the sexualized public sphere enabling this film culture?

A few months later I emailed my friend in Berlin asking her what had really happened during the screening. She answered that the man had put his arm on the armrest, then slowly moved it closer to her body and touched her. She writes:

The hand was there throughout the film, on the armrest. At some point I put his hand back at the armrest since it had landed on my side of it. The person did not seem to realize that he did something that made me feel unease. When I looked at him, he seemed to have the coziest time ever, seemed mostly happy that I looked at him.¹⁶

As this example demonstrates, any understanding of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn as potentially sexually empowering needs to take into account where, when, and how the experience of it takes place. As Jane Juffer argues, the meanings of pornography need to be located in relation to specific contexts of production, distribution, and consumption. In her work on the home as a site for women’s porn consumption, Juffer problematizes ideas about the transformative power of interpretation as an isolated practice, as placeless individual reader agency, and subversion in an undifferentiated public sphere.¹⁷ The conditions of access and agency, the relation between the individual subject, and the forces that enable and constrict her movement between sites where porn is available, need to be analyzed.¹⁸

As my example from the Pornfilmfestival Berlin demonstrates, these enabling and constricting forces are not just economic or material but also cultural and lived as embodied experience. Differently gendered, classed, and raced bodies are differently conditioned and located. In Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological terms they extend differently in space—precisely as in this situation where the man next to my friend reached past his side of the armrest to touch her while she squeezed her arms around herself. In Ahmed’s argument, bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force, and “gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies [. . .] partly through the loop of this repetition.”¹⁹ In her email my friend writes:

Despite my thirty years I still have not learned to say no, that I’m in charge of my body and very easily could tell a man to stop if he crosses a boundary. Words to mark boundaries are something I’ve often needed but not had access to. I have to struggle to dare saying no; it does not come naturally.

My friend describes how she had arrived at this screening with the feeling that here she could feel bodily loose and free, that she would not have to be self-conscious about her body in this context. Her experience of discomfort in the theater is akin to the feeling of disorientation, of becoming an object, of "losing one's place."²⁰ Referencing Frantz Fanon's insights about racial abjection, Ahmed contends that "disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis."²¹ The bodily feeling of disorientation can be "a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body."²² This situation in the theater in Berlin involved white bodies, but can still be understood through Ahmed's discussion about how violation and disorientation may block action and accumulate stress.²³

Queer, Feminist, and Lesbian Porn as an Alternative Public Sphere

The transnational queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture can be seen as an alternative public sphere where such forces, naturalized directions, and stress are negotiated and reformulated, and where new worlds may come into reach. Borrowing from film historian Miriam Hansen, this film culture potentially enables an alternative experiential horizon.²⁴ Just as early cinema in Hansen's argument opened up an arena for a new discourse on femininity and a redefinition of norms and codes of sexual conduct, so too can this contemporary film culture be said to function as an arena where new sexual discourses and conduct can be articulated and expressed.²⁵ This arena involves both the physical space of the theater and "the phantasmagoric space on the screen, and the multiple and dynamic transactions between these spaces."²⁶ At play in my experience of *Much More Pussy* were such dynamic transactions: between the space on the screen and the space of the theater; between the empowering interactions among the women in the film; between this man harassing my friend and my own expectations that here gendered norms would be redefined, not reinforced; between the queer, feminist, and lesbian film culture and the wider sexualized public sphere.

I suggest one way of understanding the ambivalence of this experience and the complexity of this alternative public sphere's overlapping with the wider sexualized public is to conceptualize it also as a multiple and dynamic transaction between the spaces of *counter public* activism and *intimate public* affirmation. As theorized by Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion

Young, and Michael Warner, the notion of counter public describes an alternative space where marginalized groups formulate and circulate counter discourses, where new understandings and ideas of their experiences, identities, and interests are encouraged and mobilized to challenge the wider public.²⁷ I contend that queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture can be understood as a counter public sphere where dominant notions of sexuality and gender are challenged.

In an article published on the Swedish political debate website *News-mill* the week of the premiere of *Dirty Diaries* in August 2009, the director Marit Östberg argues in favor of taking control of sexual objectification and “screaming out our horniness”:

Feminist porn wants people to be horny, wants to encourage people to feel sexy and to be sexual objects, but decide for themselves how, why and for whom. Once you have that power it is much easier to decide when you DO NOT want to be sexual. [—] *Dirty Diaries* is an important project because we need to create more images of desire, ways of having sex and different ways of screaming out our horniness. We need more portraits of sexy fantasies. With the film *Authority* in *Dirty Diaries* I want to celebrate all the proud, shameless, horny and queer bodies that paint their dreams over the public sphere.²⁸

Through Marit Östberg’s and other *Dirty Diaries* filmmakers’ participation in media, as well as through the film’s wide circulation in Sweden and abroad, *Dirty Diaries* gained far more publicity than the male-dominated space of Swedish filmmaking normally allows.²⁹ By using mobile phone cameras, these queer feminist porn filmmakers entered into the means of production by sharing and circulating their self-represented sexuality in public.

However, according to Lauren Berlant, the concept of counter public overemphasizes a political register.³⁰ In her work on intimate publics, Berlant focuses more on how publics are affectively structured as scenes for identification, reflection, and recognition and less by political aspirations. What is highlighted in Berlant’s work is less a trajectory from the margins to mobilized resistance in the wider public, but a trajectory at the level of subjectivity, where the members of an intimate public, sharing a sense of social belonging, are empowered and acknowledged affectively.

Queer, feminist, and lesbian pornography also functions as such an affirming intimate public. Across this film culture, notions of identification, reflection, and recognition are central. They reoccur in my fieldwork interviews, in productions, and in research, for instance in Cherry

Smyth's discussion about the newly emerged category of lesbian porn in 1990:

Lesbian sexuality has been repressed, rendered invisible and impotent by society. By watching porn, we can on some level recognize ourselves, defend our right to express our sexuality and assert our desire. It includes us in a subcultural system of coded sexual styles, gestures and icons which affirms our sense of belonging.³¹

Hence, I claim that the two trajectories of counter and intimate publics run parallel and intertwine in this film culture where participation is as much a matter of personal development and sexual self-exploration as of activism, of making a new discourse on sexuality and gender visible and accessible in the wider public. In my experience in Berlin, these two trajectories clashed. The public sharing of an intimate project of sexual recognition, self-discovery, and affective identification seemed to only play into the hands of dominant gender and sexual structures. It seemed to result more in exposure than in safety, affirmation, or conquering.

A number of theorists also problematize the politics of public visibility for marginalized groups.³² Phil Hubbard, for instance, rejects the "conceptualization of public space as representing a democratic space where marginalized groups can seek to oppose oppressive aspects of heteronormality," and the idea that "having free access to public space represents the achievement of full citizenship."³³ Importantly, while queer, feminist, and lesbian porn films, as pointed out before, often thematize a reclaiming of public space, this does not happen without negotiation. In her reading of the films of Candida Royalle, Linda Williams demonstrates how they create public settings for women's sexual explorations that are both safe and exciting.³⁴ In Joanna Rytel's *Dirty Diaries* contribution *Flasher Girl on Tour*, risks involved in reclaiming the sexualized public are also explicitly addressed. As she describes it, Rytel strategically only exposes herself in safe places:

What if somebody gets a hard-on and wants to rape you while you're sitting there on a park bench jacking off! . . . I've decided to simply expose myself where it's safe and where nobody can interrupt me. Obviously I wouldn't just jack off in the park like some male moron. Nope, I choose smart places. I have two favourite spots: balconies facing courtyards with hundreds of windows and on shore in front of passing ferries and boats. I mean, who's gonna jump in and stop me?!³⁵

Rytel exposes the stakes involved in reclaiming public space for queer

and feminist sexual culture. In her work on lesbian cinema, Lee Wallace demonstrates how the apartment acts as both a public and private space in lesbian feature films; the apartment “[refits] the contradictions between [lesbian cultural] aspiration and [sexual] dissidence and thus can provide the fictional setting for lesbian narratives that are simultaneously socially smooth and sexually rough.”³⁶ In Shine Louise Houston’s film *The Crash Pad* (2005) and *The Crash Pad Series* (2008–), the apartment is staged as precisely such a flexible space of publicity and privacy. The “crash pad” is an apartment for casual sex where those who have the key can go for play dates or chance encounters. The early Fatale Media production *Suburban Dykes* (1990) also reclaims domestic space as a sexually empowering space when the film’s bored lesbian couple calls an escort service and gets a visit from a leather dyke to spice up their sex life. My own *Dirty Diaries* film *Phone Fuck* is about two women’s sexual encounter over the phone while both are masturbating in their separate apartments. The private space of the two women’s apartments and their respective autoeroticism is shared between them in a mutual fantasy—but also publicly—through mobile phone technology.

Every Time We Fuck, We Win: Recognition, Resistance, and Repetition

What the image of the two intertwining—but also conflicting—trajectories of intimate and counter public spheres allows is an understanding of this film culture as a site for the continuous process of negotiation. This negotiation involves working through intersecting power structures, at the level of individual subjectivity as well as on the social level. Rather than isolated acts of subversion and reader agency in an undifferentiated public sphere, experiences in this film culture, just as mine and my friend’s, remain multiple, complex, and even contradictory. Empowerment is never guaranteed, but contingent. It is continuously fought for. In her email, my friend underscored the importance of reflecting on and talking about her experience in the theater. She found that it could potentially provide her with new tools for handling similar situations of violence, disorientation, and objectification in the future. The complex film experiences taking place in these spaces can be understood as queer moments of disorder, where, in Ahmed’s terms, the world becomes slantwise. Ahmed contends that “such moments may be the source of vitality as well as giddiness” and that “[w]e might even find joy and excitement in the horror.”³⁷

As such this film culture can also be understood with Ann Cvetkov-

ich's consideration of the healing potential of alternative sexual publics, where negative affect and trauma is embraced rather than refused.³⁸ She argues that "[a]llowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a place for shame and perversion within public discourses of sexuality rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable."³⁹ She finds that lesbian subcultures and writing on sexuality forge emotional knowledge as well as sexual pleasure out of its very roots in pain and difficulty. In these celebrations of "the hard-won experiences of sexual pleasure," intimate lives are situated in relation to different forms of oppression, to experiences of homophobia and shame in the public.⁴⁰

Such a negotiation of social relations is also central in the queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture and this is also what the women in "The Queer X Show" do. In the performance, as well as in the two films *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy*, the performers share their hard-won experiences of sexual pleasure as well as the pain and difficulties in living in a sexist, homophobic, and racist world. Their conversations and their sexual performances work through the norms, conventions, and taboos shaping and pressing on their lives, bodies, and desires. During their tour, they literally face the violence of these norms. In Paris, one of their friends was subject to a hate crime after returning home from their show and, in Malmö, they participated in a ceremony for the murdered victims of a shooting attack against a gay youth center in Tel Aviv.

The force that blew me away when I saw *Much More Pussy* was not the force of an ultimate transformation of gender and sexual hierarchies, or a construction of an alternative world beyond these hierarchies, but the force of a continuous resistance in the face of these hierarchies. This is the agency and empowerment for which this film culture may provide new conditions. In this public sphere, we might, as Ahmed puts it, "come into contact with other bodies to support the action of following paths that have not been cleared."⁴² Here, safety is not a safe world or a clear path, but the public sphere where the un-safety of being queer, female, or lesbian is forcefully acknowledged, worked through, and challenged. Queer Nation's lyrics in the soundtracks for *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy*, "Every time we fuck, we win," can only be understood in relation to its constant repetition, the claim made again and again. As the manifesto says: "Being queer . . . means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites, and our own self-hatred." Through the collective and repeated resistance to oppression, the queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture adds courage, agency, and, importantly, pleasure to this everyday fight.

Notes

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7. Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories," 131.

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9. Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 2, 4, 6.

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11. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book By and For Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973[71]), 3, 23.

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15. "Dyketactics" and "Women I Love," *The Films of Barbara Hammer* directed by Barbara Hammer (1974, 1976; New York: Women Make Movies, 1981), VHS; Barbara Hammer, *Menses* (1974), 16 mm and Barbara Hammer, *Multiple Orgasm*

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Where the Trans Women Aren't: The Slow Inclusion of Trans Women in Feminist and Queer Porn



TOBI HILL-MEYER

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I got into porn because of Camp Trans. Camp Trans started as a protest of trans women's exclusion from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1991. After two decades, Camp Trans has transformed into an amazing trans activist training and community space, an annual event that takes place near the music festival. I'd been aching to go for years, but I didn't have the money. Although attendance was based on a sliding scale donation, the five-thousand mile road trip to get there and back would require several hundred dollars. A lover offered to connect me with a photographer she had worked with at ShemaleYum.com. One two-hour shoot for them would give me the equivalent of a month's income as a tutor and fund my entire trip, so I decided to do it.

Given the name of the website, I didn't expect everything would be supportive and empowering—and it wasn't. My experience wasn't wholly negative, either. Significantly, it was the only work environment I've ever had where I was out as trans and was never mis-pronounced or misgendered. I can't say the same thing about any of the LGBT organizations I volunteered for at the time.

The shoot was a very uncomfortable, unsexy situation. I'm pretty confident in my ability to be sexy and attractive, but I wasn't allowed to be sexy the way I would be with my own lovers or partners. I had to fit an entirely different model. Knowing that it was a work situation, I was certainly willing to compromise, but the whole situation set me off balance (both figuratively and literally). I'm a butch dyke and my sex life

has never focused much on penetration, but for the shoot I had to shave myself, put on stockings and heels, and hold my balance while leaning over and spreading my ass cheeks. The whole time I had to implicitly consent to being labeled by a horrible slur, “shemale.”

Of course, all of this made it that much harder for me to perform the basic functions of the job: maintaining an erection and orgasming on command. It was only a series of photos followed by five-to-ten minutes of video, and while I’m usually comfortable modeling for a camera, the whole situation made me nervous and uncomfortable. As things progressed I had to go farther and farther out of my comfort zone. After about an hour and a half of tiring work, many photographs, and much uncomfortable posing, it was my job to masturbate to orgasm. After about five minutes the photographer leaned in and said in a somewhat exasperated voice, “So, are you going to cum now?” As you can imagine, that kind of pressure only makes things more difficult. Especially when I couldn’t do the things that normally turned me on because some corporate executive decided it wasn’t sexy. I got through it, but I was pretty freaked out afterward. I was shaking so much that I needed to have my lover drive us home.

I probably could have found a work mode that would have allowed me to sufficiently dissociate and perform as someone else if it had been important enough, but I never got the opportunity to try because of my inability to ejaculate. It’s a pretty common condition among trans women; in fact, the ability to ejaculate is about as common (or uncommon) among cis women as it is among trans women. Despite this, ShemaleYum.com (and the other website I subsequently worked for) insisted upon it. It’s not a scene without a money shot. Both times I told them up front that my body didn’t do that, and was told that it would be okay. However, it turned out they were just hoping they could get me to ejaculate under “the right circumstances.”

During my second gig, I gave a much better performance. Knowing what to expect, I was better able to relax into my exhibitionist side, and I actually had a lot of fun feeling like I was turning on my audience. I had an incredible orgasm that lasted at least fifteen to twenty seconds, a rare feat that I’ve only caught on film a few times since. However, halfway into it—while I was still writhing and lost in the pleasure—the videographer put down his camera and asked me if I could fake an ejaculation by squirting lube on my stomach. I was too stunned to be angry. I was giving them gold and he wasn’t even recording it because a splash of fluid on my stomach was more important than a real orgasm.

The company would not hire me to do any more solos after that. I

could only do another scene if I worked with someone who did ejaculate. I talked it over with a partner who does and was prepared to do a scene, but heard back that the producers thought she was too “rough.” We could only guess this was because they didn’t see her as conventionally attractive, sufficiently feminine, or thin enough. After that, they stopped answering my emails.

With rare exceptions, trans women are not cast in any genre of mainstream porn (gonzo, features, girl/girl, and so on) except “tranny/shemale porn,” the derogatory phrase used to market trans women porn in the mainstream industry. Not only does that mean having your image publicized with derogatory terms, but “tranny/shemale porn” producers have a very specific list of conventions that they expect their “shemale” performers to follow. These include: wearing makeup and high heels, shaving one’s legs, appearing traditionally feminine, getting and keeping a strong erection, ejaculating, and either penetrating someone with your genitals or being penetrated. With all the expectations of producers and viewers of “tranny/shemale porn,” there is no place for someone like me—someone with short hair and unshaved legs wearing a dapper vest and fedora while packing a strap on and engaging in non-genitally focused sex.

When mainstream producers are challenged to change their conventions, they fear losing their existing audience that has been trained to expect and respond to those conventions. However, they sacrifice authenticity for convention. Mainstream sex work often (if not inherently) requires that the workers conform to someone else’s desires rather than express their own. I thought, there has to be a better way. There has to be an audience that values diversity over cookie-cutter scenes, pleasure over fluids, and authenticity over façade—it must exist because that’s the kind of porn my friends and I wanted to watch. We were an untapped market, and while that meant there was far less competition, it also meant that there was little to no infrastructure to reach us. The mainstream industry has been unwilling to depart from their formula because doing so would require reaching out to an entirely new group, one that might not even go into a porn store under typical circumstances. I’ve known of far too many people who were excited to explore their sexuality and interested in doing so through pornography, but gave up when they looked around at the porn that is available and could not find anything they liked.

Feminist and queer porn creates a space for authentic sexual representations. It’s done a good job of representing cis women’s sexuality, and I wanted to see porn that did the same for trans women. I knew of three

or four films made by trans men, and I had seen occasional appearances by trans men in queer cis women's films. I didn't know of a single trans woman in any feminist and queer porn. Was it really possible that no one had ever made hot, feminist, trans women-focused porn? I found just two examples of trans women in feminist porn: Jenny Mutation, who had about two minutes of screen time in *Dominatrix Waitrix* (2005), and Julie, who did a scene for *The Crash Pad Series* (2007), which won the 2009 Feminist Porn Award for Most Tantalizing Trans Scene. I look to both women as heroes and inspirations. At the same time, most of the people I talked to who watched these two scenes assumed that both women were cis, and the inclusion of trans women in these works was not well-publicized.

I want to emphasize that being seen as cis doesn't take away from the magnitude of what they accomplished as the first trans women in queer pornography. Different trans people want different things, and some people just want to be fully recognized as their gender without attention being focused on their trans status; both scenes are great examples of that validation. However, I wanted more instances of representation, more visibility, and scenes that publicized their inclusion of trans women.

Since then, some improvements have been made. *The Crash Pad Series* is a clear example. At the time of this writing, there are five trans women actors in this series. Even though this is an improvement, this number is still significantly lower than the number of trans men and female-assigned genderqueers in the same series. This pattern holds true and is often even stronger in other parts of queer and feminist porn. It is telling that I continue to run into people who are under the impression that there are no trans women in the series at all.

This overall lack of representation is not entirely unexpected given that feminist and queer porn has its roots in the queer women's community, where trans men are very visible while trans women are not. This is caused by the unique intersection of transphobia and misogyny, called transmisogyny. Historically, trans women have been systematically excluded and driven out of women's spaces even when trans men have not. Society's general valuing of masculinity permeates even queer women's communities and trans men are regularly seen as attractive and desirable. Transphobic logic sees trans men as softer, gentler versions of "real men." As a result, trans men are both exoticized and invalidated. The corollary is that trans women are seen as male and as a threat; however, just as often trans women aren't considered except as an afterthought, or in many cases not thought of at all. As a result, trans men tend to be much more present in women's communities than trans

women. This leads to a significant number of trans men in feminist and queer porn and very few trans women. This disproportionate representation is visible in pansexual-oriented queer porn, however, when even lesbian-oriented porn prioritizes trans men over trans women this problem becomes clearer. That's why doing this work is not just about trans inclusion in general, but the inclusion of trans women specifically.

I knew that I couldn't make trans women-focused porn in the mainstream, and while trans women were underrepresented in feminist and queer porn, I looked to feminist and queer porn producers as role models since they had made a significant impact in re-envisioning porn for queer women. Mainstream girl/girl porn tends to be full of sexist and heterosexist conventions. For example, oral sex with the performer's head pulled back and tongue fully extended, which prioritizes the camera's view over the pleasure of the activity; the awkwardly long fake nails that prevent effective mutual masturbation; or the clothing, makeup, and hairstyles that are specifically designed to appeal to straight men. Queer women viewers often respond that no one in girl/girl porn looked at all like the women in their community, at their bars, or who they are crushing out on. In response, adventurous queer women have been making their own porn for decades.

The misrepresentations in girl/girl porn that queer pornographers address have a lot in common with the discrepancies between "tranny/shemale porn" and trans women's actual sexuality. Trans women are often uncomfortable with our genitals, yet mainstream porn focuses on big hard cocks to such a degree it's not uncommon for trans women to find it emotionally triggering. As a response to that genital dysphoria, trans women often find a wide variety of creative sexual activities to engage in: tribadism, perineum stimulation, non-genital sensation play, use of strap-ons, penetration of inguinal canals (the areas of the body that the testes descend from, which can be penetrated with a finger or similar object by inverting the scrotal/labial tissue surrounding them), and so forth. The mainstream porn industry focuses almost exclusively on fucking and sucking.

Following in the footsteps of my sex-positive cis dyke sisters, when I want something done right, I do it myself. Other than a middle school film class, I had no experience with video. I approached the project as an organizer. I figured out what I needed, how to achieve it, and relied heavily on the skills and knowledge of friends. I put out the initial casting call and got a lot of positive feedback from people who were excited about the idea, as well as a dozen or so performers scattered across the continent.

This enthusiastic response made it clear how needed this project was. Many people were eager to help out behind the camera, and I was lucky to have a friend in film school who was willing to loan me her camera and consult with me whenever I had questions. The project would not have been possible without the support of skilled individuals willing to work far below standard industry rates and others willing to help out in small ways for free.

Ironically, rampant antitrans employment discrimination meant I was able to find other trans women who had plenty of free time to help because they were dealing with chronic unemployment/underemployment. I was glad to have a production crew that was mostly trans women and almost entirely trans or genderqueer. Unfortunately, working with a marginalized population had drawbacks. Due to various life crises, such as poverty, homelessness, depression, and problems with the police, my first two editors had to leave the project.

It was lucky I had backups, because I never was able to get the footage back from my second editor. The first scene we shot was between me and Gina deVries. After the shoot, Gina suggested we apply to perform on *The Crash Pad Series*. I was enthusiastic but still a bit timid. There are a lot of issues around the exclusion of trans women from queer women's spaces—especially when sexuality is involved. There is a strong history of feminist thinkers who oppose giving respect or legal rights to trans women, including Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Janice Raymond, Germaine Greer, Julie Bindel, and Shelia Jeffreys. With the commonly espoused fear of “men infiltrating women's spaces” and some even comparing trans women's mere presence in women's communities to rape, the stakes can be very high for trans women wanting to enter a “women's space.” Although I knew that Julie had performed for them before, part of me worried that her inclusion this time was based on her surgical status and ability to pass as cis and not based on a choice to include all trans women.

Once I took the leap, I discovered that the casting coordinator actually wanted to have more trans women. Within a couple months my fears were put to rest as I did my scene. I became the second trans woman on the site—and the first with my particular genital configuration. It was a great introduction to the queer porn community. Not only was the scene directed by Shine Louise Houston, the mastermind behind *Pink and White Productions*, but, as chance would have it, Courtney Trouble, the creator of the groundbreaking *NoFauxxx.com*, was the still photographer. To suddenly be working with two of the largest figures in the

industry underscored both how small and interconnected the feminist and queer porn communities are, and that I was now becoming a part of it.

The following year I attended the Feminist Porn Awards for the first time. I was given the opportunity to present a preview clip from *Doing It Ourselves*. It was an amazing, eye-opening experience. Receiving validation for my work, especially from queer cis women who cared about the lack of visible trans women in their community *and* the lack of representation of trans women in queer porn, was amazing.

I asked myself, if so many people in queer porn cared about including trans women, why wasn't it happening more than one or two times? One answer I found was that in any production, there will be so many objectives that often times completing a project takes priority over other goals. Other queer porn producers cared about the issue, but none had made it their first priority. In addition, it is a natural reaction for underrepresented communities to be hypercritical of what little representation there is because it has so much impact; I'm quite aware of that impulse when I engage in criticism of my own and others' work, but I believe it is important to engage in it nonetheless.

I set out to make my film as a response to the criticism of how trans women have been represented in mainstream porn, and their lack of representation in queer porn. With the critical focus on representation, I spent a lot of time thinking about casting. I received very few applications from folks who already had scene partners in mind, and several applications from geographically dispersed candidates looking for me to play matchmaker; my options were limited.

I came up with over a dozen underrepresented demographic categories that I wanted to have in the cast. I wanted to include at least one trans man, cis woman, and cis man, in addition to trans women with a range of surgical statuses and experiences relating to their bodies and sexuality. I also wanted to cast people of color and people with a wide range of body types. Of course, doing all this at once was a problem, especially considering that I only had space for eight cast members. Some folks, like myself, would fit more than one of those categories, but I quickly realized that just one film could not accomplish everything that I wanted to see.

Addressing the issue of comprehensive representation takes time, planning, and energy. Availability and limited resources at once seemed to be the central problem with representation in queer porn. I can't keep up the rate of one film a year, and websites that update regularly budget

for a specific number of scenes per year, often with a backlog of regular performers on a waiting list. No matter how much we make, it's never enough to represent everyone we want to.

These factors contribute to the underrepresentation of trans women in queer porn, but they don't explain the severity of it. I wouldn't expect every DVD on the queer porn shelf at a feminist sex store to include trans women, but very few do. Those that do seem to always have two to three times as many trans men. There's enough transmisogyny in our communities in general for trans women interested in acting to assume they won't be welcomed, especially if they perceive this underrepresentation as intentional. Underrepresentation can be an indication of hostility so, on multiple occasions, I have personally told trans women interested in doing porn that The Crash Pad Series and NoFauxxx.com would welcome them. Having an inclusive policy is great, but it is not very effective without being publicized. Until it is explicitly stated—and not just in the small print—it's not unreasonable for potential models or audiences to wonder if trans women are actually welcome and included as equals. It's like the treadmill metaphor of oppression—if you're standing still, you're being pushed along with oppression. You have to walk just to stay in place, and you have to run if you want to make any change.

Another reason for the underrepresentation is that casting is largely based on personal connections. As a director, it's tempting to cast a person when you already know their skills, abilities, and professional demeanor. Someone you don't know could clash with the rest of the cast, have different expectations for their work, or just be difficult and unreasonable. Without a good reference, it's always a risk to go with someone unknown. I don't think anyone is *only* hiring people they know personally, but knowing the casting director does give someone a huge advantage. Understanding this dynamic, I have sought out trans women who want to break into queer porn and gotten to know them so I can act as a reference for other directors I know.

There's a lot a director can do to specifically combat these problems. Send recruitment announcements to trans-positive communities and spaces, make an extra effort to be encouraging with trans women applicants, ask trans women models to refer their friends, make a commitment to including a trans woman in each film (or season, year, and so on), or do extra publicity for the trans women actors you've already included.

After I finished *Doing It Ourselves* and it went out into the world, I got several letters from fans. Some of them talked about how *Doing It Ourselves* helped them process their own experiences around sexual-

ity. Others were simply happy to have had the first opportunity to see someone like themselves in a positive sexual representation. One fan wrote, "I've done mainstream trans porn and I honestly find it really gross and offensive . . . I definitely think you are doing awesome things and you are certainly one of the people inspiring me to make porn that I'm not embarrassed to be in and that I actually find hot." These are the responses that I was hoping for, and they are what drive me to continue doing this work. In short, I want to do porn that inspires people.

Trans women still face major barriers to inclusion in feminist and queer porn, but the work to make that inclusion a reality is finally being done. Twelve years after the first porn film made by trans men claiming their own erotic and pornographic space, there is finally a film doing the same thing for trans women. Slowly, there are more and more feminist and queer porn films and websites including trans women. Many don't make a big deal about it, creating both a positive impact in terms of recognizing trans people's genders and an unfortunate side effect of underpublicizing trans women's inclusion. However, there are instances where trans women's inclusion is being celebrated as well. At the 2011 Feminist Porn Awards, the award for Heartthrob of the Year went to a trans woman. In the past two years alone, I've been contacted by five different sets of trans women interested in making their own porn films. There's still a lot of work to be done, and we will need all the help we can get. Nonetheless, it's an exciting time, and I can't wait to see what happens.

Author's note: For a timeline of trans and genderqueer performers in trans-made, queer, and independent porn, see thefeministpornbook.com.

Imag(in)ing Possibilities: The Psychotherapeutic Potential of Queer Pornography



KEIKO LANE

Keiko Lane is a Japanese American poet, essayist, and psychotherapist. In addition to her literary writing, which has been published in journals and anthologies, she writes about the intersections of queer culture, oppression resistance, and liberation psychology. Her current writing projects focus on the relationship between queer kinship, and queer rage and grief in the long-term survival of ACT UP and Queer Nation. Keiko has a private practice in Berkeley, California, that specializes in working with queers of all genders, artists, activists, academics, and other clients who self-identify as postcolonial. She is a volunteer therapist with Survivors International, where she works with refugees and asylum seekers. Keiko also teaches graduate psychotherapy courses on queer and multicultural psychotherapies, the psychodynamics of social justice, and the embodied literature of exile.

The first time I talked about pornography with a psychotherapy client I was an intern. Still in grad school, I saw clients in a San Francisco counseling clinic that offered therapy to the community on a sliding scale. Because I was one of the few out queer therapists, I was assigned many of the queer clients.

The client with whom I was talking about porn was a butch-identified dyke in her late twenties who was seeking therapy because she was struggling with issues she felt resulted from a history of childhood sexual abuse. She wanted to heal sexually and to reclaim a sense of desire and agency. She said she felt depressed because she was unsure that healing was possible.

We met in a miniscule office just off the waiting room of the converted Victorian that housed the clinic. The room faced west. Through the lacy curtains, the afternoon light poured in, leaving watery shadow patterns on the walls. The room had space enough for two chairs and a

small table where I kept my appointment book and the tape recorder my supervisor insisted I use to record my sessions.

Over the course of a few months, the client told me about the abuse she had suffered as a young girl, which was simultaneous to her budding understanding that she did not feel normatively gendered. During her late teens and early twenties, she had questioned whether she might be transgendered. She decided that she didn't actually imagine herself as male, but concomitantly didn't feel she interacted with women the same ways she saw other dykes interacting.

"I mean, it isn't that I can't, you know, pass as a 'normal dyke,'" she said, turning away from me.

"What is a 'normal dyke'?" I asked.

"Well, you know, um . . . nice?"

"Nice?" I was not certain where this was headed.

"Yeah."

"So, you're not *nice*," I said.

"Well, no, that isn't exactly right. I can be. I mean . . . I can go to parties or bars and make small talk and be funny and laugh at the right places in the conversation. But that's not how I want to be," she said. "It's frustrating. I'm frustrated and sad at the end of the night, after I go out with my friends and they've hooked up with other people, or whatever." She looked around the room, uneasy. In our small space, there weren't many places to look. Her gaze fixed on the tape recorder on the table.

"I just . . . I don't want it all to be so happy, so cheerful, so polite, you know? What about aggression? Or power? Maybe I'm not normal? I want to, you know, be in charge."

"You want to be in charge sexually?" I asked.

"Yeah, but also, just in interactions. I want to tell a girl what to do and have her listen to me. Maybe not even all the time—but sometimes. I don't mean that I want to do stuff to her that she doesn't want done. But I like that edge," she said. "Is this reenacting the abuse? That's what a friend told me. But I want her to want it. I just want to be in charge."

I asked her about her fantasies of being in charge and she became silent. The images that turned her on, she said quietly, were from porn she didn't really like or, she corrected herself, didn't want to like. Images she was certain, as she prefaced her explanation to me, were made by and for straight men. Of feminine women being forced to perform sexually. In most of the images, the perpetrators were men. That was part of the reason she questioned her own gender. It had taken her a long time to realize that she didn't want to be in their bodies; she just wanted to

do what they did. When my client did find pornography that showed two women together, both women were traditionally feminine with long nails, big hair, and fake breasts and seemed to not be enjoying themselves. The few porn films she had seen that were made by women felt tame to her, with no sense of power being exchanged.

My client took a big risk in telling me what she wanted, what turned her on. We continued to talk about her sense of her gender and her desire for power. Over the course of a few years surrounding herself in community—since moving to the Bay Area from a smaller city—she had become comfortable with her butchness. But she had not found her way into a community of BDSM or kink-identified folks where she could explore her desires for power, for a lover who'd consent to giving her control. What she had found were images that did not accurately reflect her or her desires, but she was attempting to project herself into these images because they reflected the kind of power that she was attracted to.

After the session ended, I turned off the tape recorder. I had a brief fantasy of erasing the tape, because I didn't sound like any of the neutral-toned, psychoanalytic therapists in the case studies my supervisor had been giving me to read. My fantasies of erasing the tape, or even just misplacing it, were quickly supplanted by a sinking feeling of dread over sharing it with my supervisor.

My trepidation was correct. My clinical supervisor, a heterosexual, white, traditionally psychoanalytic, and conservatively feminist psychotherapist was not pleased with my work. She believed that all pornography exploits women, who must be coerced into performing, and she was concerned that my client's interest in kink and BDSM was indicative of an unconscious desire to reenact the abuse. My supervisor was interested in the fact that my client imagined herself as the one in control. She thought it meant that my client was identifying with her abuser and desired to play out her abuse on another woman who would look the part of the archetypal feminine woman, and that through the interaction, my client hoped to be healed by externalizing her sense of powerlessness and femininity and projecting it into a sexual partner.

In my supervisor's assessment, reenactments are always pathological—the desire to feed the perpetually overwhelmed state of the psyche and the nervous system.

I did wonder if my supervisor was correct, but I didn't think that it had to be a pathological urge that leads us to reenact our past traumas, if we are conscious of the process and pay attention to how we feel and how we integrate the experience. In a healing enactment, some of that experience is symbolized. My client did not wish to actually violate the

boundaries of consent of a partner, she wished to have control given to her so she could have the *experience* of control and empowerment.

I argued with my supervisor about this for weeks. She was interested in my ideas about symbolized enactments, but still felt that my client was setting herself up to traumatize herself or someone else. Eventually she told me that I had to confront my client, to caution her against enacting her fantasies and urge her to explore them only verbally.

I dreaded that session with my client. We continued exploring a fantasy she'd had, based on a porn film she'd seen, of tying up a woman who struggled against ropes with fear in her eyes.

"Maybe this is too perverse," said my client, shaking her head. "Maybe it is wrong to want this— maybe that fear was real, not an act. Maybe it was violence."

I was acutely aware of the tape recorder on the table next to me, and imagined my supervisor listening to the tape. "Maybe that is true," I said to her. "What if it was?"

I don't remember much about the rest of the session, other than the lack of eye contact, the sense of great distance between us in the cramped, sunny space, and the amplified hiss of the tape recorder.

The therapy only lasted a few sessions after that. My client decided that she accomplished what she had wanted to in our sessions. Indeed, she was feeling more relaxed in social situations and more connected to her friends. But even as I affirmed those developments with her and told myself that they were true, I knew also that I had betrayed her, that I had confronted her most vulnerable, wounded self and made it clear that her desires weren't welcome in my office.

In believing my supervisor, I shamed my client in the ways in which she had been shamed by others. I continued her experience of not seeing herself reflected, by her abusive family, by mainstream lesbian culture, by her therapist, or by the pornography that she found.

Fast-forward ten years.

I teach a class called *Queer Bodies in Psychotherapy* to graduate students who are studying to become psychotherapists. Often my students tell me that their education thus far has been filled with traditional psychotherapy texts—including minimal and often-outdated clinical information about sexualities and gender identities—and virtually no breadth of information about sex practices. They are studying for their degree to become marriage and family therapists in the state of California. My class is an elective.

The first time I taught the class, I endeavored to create a reader and

resource list that I thought would give my students the best survey of information I could find on the ranges of sex practices, sexual identities, and embodied responses to cultural oppressions of gender and sexuality, and their intersections with race, class, and other identities that have been discounted by mainstream academia and psychology.

I spent months culling thousands of pages of articles into an almost reasonable length for a one-semester class. The reader was relentlessly sexual and explicit. Out of good faith, I went to speak with my academic dean. She supported me in my assertion that we could not teach students to become therapists who are able to speak explicitly about sex and sexuality with their clients, without modeling for them in the classroom how to do just that, but she still had concerns about the extent to which sexually explicit material made up my course materials.

We struggled to explore why we aren't supposed to talk about sex in academia. We agreed that the glossed-over, vague clinical teachings about the importance of emotional intimacy, and the insistent linking of all healthy sexual expression with emotional intimacy, is a part of the same shaming of sexual desire and agency that leads clients—especially women and queer clients—to our offices.

Ultimately the dean supported my curriculum and my explicit conversations about sex and sex practices in my classroom, but with one caveat: text and some photography only. No pornography in the classroom.

Most of the text I teach to my students isn't writing that's coming out of the field of clinical psychology. It's from queer theorists, sex educators, self-identified sex radicals, AIDS activists, and sex workers who are interrogating issues of cultural (mis)appropriations and shame. So even without showing pornography in my classroom, there was always enough sexually explicit material to talk about. Or so I thought.

Students started reporting in class about their experiences in their clinical internships. As when I was an intern, many training clinics, where the majority of supervisory staff or clinicians are heterosexual, have a tendency to assign all of the queer clients to the queer clinicians, regardless of gender expression or sex practices. The result looks something like this: dyke interns unfamiliar with gay male sexual expressions find themselves as new therapists sitting with gay male clients struggling with questions of safer sex and HIV risk. White gay men who don't know about the spectrum of possible trans bodies find themselves needing to talk about hormones and packing cocks with African-American, genderqueer FTMs.

It isn't that I expect my students to become experts in all forms of

sexual and gender expression, but I do hope for them—and expect of them—that they become familiar enough, educated enough, and nonre-active enough to treat clients with respect and curiosity about their experiences and how they understand them, instead of needing their clients to educate them.

I assure my students that we all have ideas about sexualities and sexual practices that we have aversions to, don't know anything about, or are simply not interested in, but that when we think about our clinical work, our own interest isn't the point. I then tell them to go rent pornography and watch as many videos as it takes to learn five new things, and then do it again. Not necessarily sex acts or positions—though certainly those are learned—but more complicated representations and enactments of desire and power.

This isn't an exercise in converting them to any particular kind of sex practice; it is however, about broadening their ideas about sex practices and desires so that when clients come in who are often socialized to feel shame about their desires, their therapists won't further shame them. We need to learn to be present with our clients' experiences and desires, and to be curious about them without leading to the activation of our own fears or uncertainties.

My students and I then talk about what kinds of pornography they should be watching. In my class, questions about “what kind” of pornography aren't code for kinds of sexual practices. It is an explicit conversation about my belief in feminist pornography and what that means. We talk about the importance of performers' self-authorization; porn stars who actively and politically claim the role and title of porn star as a stand against sex-shaming, normative cultural expectations; performers who identify as exhibitionists and perform sometimes with partners of their own choosing, with the bodily limits that they have articulated for themselves; and films in which we can trust that the role of consent was central, including films that include behind-the-scenes interviews with performers explaining not only their willingness to perform, but often their own sense of excitement at setting up their own scenes, and sometimes even the negotiation of limits between partners before those scenes.

Additionally, I want my students to learn to talk in public about sex, to develop comfort with asking questions. Even though there is a lot of porn available online, including grassroots, feminist porn, teaching in San Francisco means I can send students on field trips to Good Vibrations and other sex-toy stores to peruse the rows of pornography available for rent or purchase, and to ask questions of the staff. My classroom

is often a site of cultural contact for students who come from communities where there was no easy access to information about sex and sex practices, and who stare wide eyed at my assignments. Many students who live in the Bay Area moved there because of the area's reputation as a mecca for sexual outsiders. And very often, my students have ties to the porn and sex industries. As some students make classroom confessions about their favorite porn stars, other students tentatively disclose their experiences with sex work, stripping, producing or acting in porn, or working in other parts of the sex industry.

Good pornography, like good sex education, is useful as a therapeutic tool not because it sets out to convince my clients and students that they want to do everything—or anything—they see, but because it helps to build somatic and visual vocabularies from which to make empowered choices.

As we talk in class about pornography, the externalization of desire, and porn as sex education, the question inevitably comes to this: How do we actually make use of porn in therapy as a therapeutic tool with clients? There is always at least one student who has been taught by a professor, or by conservative feminist politics, to believe—not unlike my first supervisor—that pornography, especially when working with survivors of sexual trauma, leads to enactments of abuse. I want to be able to categorically deny this. But I can't quite.

On the occasions I have seen porn lead to traumatic reenactments, it has been the result of people trying to enact scenes they've watched when they have no prior experience with that particular kind of sex play. I want to help clients take away from porn that they've watched, and which has aroused desire, an articulation of the feelings that they want to explore and the ability to then negotiate scenes based on their own experience and boundaries that allow for those explorations.

Most porn isn't subtle. It relies on big visual emotion and physicality. I tell my students that it is our job as therapists to work with clients and help them begin to recognize their own internal cues and their ability to maintain connection to their emotional and bodily experience without dissociating. This means working with clients to build their awareness of sensations that aren't visible in performance when watching porn—sensations in their hands and feet, connection to their breath and the beating of their heart, and connection to the body and experience of their sexual partner(s).

I make it clear to my students and clients that I don't think there's anything wrong with playing with big exertion and physicality. But the kinds of exertions and exuberant physicality that might look great on

screen shouldn't be valorized over more subtle forms of play and exploration, especially when working with survivors of sexualized violence. The therapeutic goal isn't about any particular kind of sexuality or sexual expression, it's about building the capacity to stay present with one's own experience.

When I talk with my clients about porn, I deliberately point out that the performances they witness often do not push the bodies of the actors many steps past what is already a part of their bodily experience and performance repertoire. The work that we do in therapy to distill scenes to their psychological essence and redesign them for clients' bodily experiences and limits is part of what can be healing for clients and can allow for the reclamation of experience.

I work near the borderline of Berkeley and Oakland. My office is on the third floor of a quaint and quiet craftsman building converted into psychotherapy suites. On clear afternoons, through the west-facing window of my office, the San Francisco Bay sparkles under the burnt orange peaks of the Golden Gate Bridge. The courtyard blooms year round with lilies and lavender. Most importantly, I'm accessible to the queer activists, students, and radical folks of color who make up the majority of my clients.

One example that I give my students is of a Chicana lesbian couple who came to see me because their sex life had dwindled. As I questioned them about their experience, we discovered that they had not come up against a lack of desire, but that they each had fantasies they wanted to try out that the other was hesitating about. When they talked together about their desires, each became scared and overwhelmed by what the other was proposing. When we explored their fears about what they thought the other desired, they were never entirely correct, often imagining far edgier sex play than either partner actually desired. One wanted to play with bondage, the other with dirty talk. We decided that much less threatening to each would be finding porn that depicted their desires, and then watching it together and see how it felt without the pressure of having to enact anything. Watching others perform what they were interested in exploring allowed for an amplification of experience that they could project themselves into with the goal of staying present with their experiences.

As with this couple, many of the clients who come to see me to talk about issues of gender, sexuality, and sex practices are survivors of sexual abuse and sexualized violence. They are searching for language and images to help them articulate their experiences, fears, and fanta-

sies. Even most good writing about sex, consent, and sexual experience depends on theory, not the breath, skin, and bones experiences of our actual bodies.

Pornography invokes a suspension of disbelief. It asks us to project ourselves into the experiences of others we witness, to try to imagine how those experiences would feel, and whether we want to enact them.

The women in this couple and I spent time talking about how their histories of sexual trauma and recovery felt linked to their daily experiences of racism. When they thought about the possibility of playing with issues of power between them, they had difficulty disconnecting power-play from their daily struggles for empowerment. They didn't want their sex life to be another site of struggle.

But as we continued exploring their embodied linking of sex, trauma, racism, and struggles for self-authorization, we wondered if incorporating edge play and power into their explicit sexual vocabulary would in fact help them to integrate their sexuality with the other aspects of their empowered cultural resistances.

So we began to ask other kinds of questions: When we experience something as scary or dangerous, why do we believe we shouldn't explore it? When is anything not raced, classed, or gendered? It is just that we often avoid becoming conscious of those dynamics, or set out to actively interrogate our feelings about them.

When we explore our feelings of oppression in the context of a negotiated scene, we give ourselves permission to become acutely aware of power imbalances around issues of identity that we live with daily, but that we usually defend against knowing consciously. When we play with these dynamics, yes, they are uncomfortable—or exciting, or dangerous—but that isn't different from how we actually experience them; we often keep those experiences just outside of our conscious awareness. We are allowing ourselves to have the feelings that we carry in our bodies daily. What comes next—grieving, fighting back—is all the exploration of our unconscious desires and fantasies made conscious.

When the couple did finally sit down to watch each other's fantasies played out on their TV screen, they were each turned on by the other's fantasies. It had been crucial for them to find queer pornography starring women of color who seemed truly into what they were doing, and not victimized.

"Oh, *that's* what you meant? I'd love to," responded one of the women. They each felt more open to trying out their fantasies, and they negotiated a variation of the porn scene they had watched, and scaled their play to the boundaries and limits they wanted to start with.

Pornography can show us not only what we desire, but also what we grieve. In the past few years, I've been working with gay men who have come into therapy to grieve the decimation of their communities from AIDS. Most of them have lost lovers, all of them have lost friends, and some are HIV positive. When we spend time talking about their losses, the loss of a sense of freedom around their sexuality is always a source of intense grief. They know about safer sex and how to make safe sex hot, and many of them report no conflict in their actual, embodied sexual lives about HIV status or precautions. But what they long for is a time or place immune to fear. We talk about the ways in which they use pornography that depicts unprotected sex as an act of remembrance of a kind of sexuality unhindered by fear of contamination. Porn that features unprotected sex is the iconography of their loss.

My own first exposures to empowered queer pornography were in the late night parties of Queer Nation, and projected onto the walls of galleries during ACT UP benefit parties in the late 1980s and early 90s. Even then, images of unprotected sex were the icons of rebellion, the fantasy of bodies in contact without barriers or borders, which is still the fantasy of sex that many people carry, and the emotional interpretation of which is still held as the psychoanalytic goal of "healthy intimacy."

With my clients, I refrain from sharing my history with queer porn in order to allow space for their own associations to take center stage in our work. This is, of course, the traditional psychotherapeutic framework: keeping, when possible, the subjectivities of the therapist out of the middle of the consulting room. I believe, however, that we are in a cultural moment when the need for therapists to use our own experiences, and make them visible to our clients, has moments of centrality.

Over the past several years, transgender and genderqueer clients have come to my office exploring their bodily shame, grief, excitements, and fantasies. Unlike the fantasies and grieving about the loss of unprotected sex that are often shared by gay men, the fantasies and grieving of trans and genderqueer clients are often about the absence of modeling and images they've had to help them articulate their desires for their embodied selves. They grieve for what they never had.

With transgender and genderqueer clients, porn often comes into our psychotherapy early as a cue of sexual desire and an exploration of object choice, and also as an exploration of embodied subjectivity. The struggle to find images of who they could imagine being often leads clients to current genderqueer porn where they find not only energetic possibilities, but also actual bodies they can imagine becoming.

Because trans and genderqueer clients often have no models of their particular embodied gender expression and experience within their families of origin, clients need therapists to encourage their development of embodied self-expression—including sexual expression. I often think of my first supervisor who would want me to remain neutral. It isn't neutral to encourage clients to develop and hold on to their fantasies of who they can be in the world. It's necessary.

When I tell my students about using porn with trans clients to help them identify embodiments that resonate with them, one case often comes to mind.

The client was Asian American, born with a female body. He had spent his twenties identifying as a butch lesbian, then as genderqueer. When he came to see me, he was starting to request that people use male pronouns when talking about him, and he was contemplating what kinds of surgery and/or hormones he might use to alter his body. He had been in a long-term relationship with a lesbian that had recently ended. He was worried that he would never find someone to be in a relationship with once he transitioned.

We spent months talking about how he imagined himself moving through the world. Though he could feel it energetically, he couldn't see what the possibilities were. When he'd look in the mirror and try to imagine a body that fit and reflected how he felt, he found that his shame about his body not matching his fantasies was so great he couldn't sustain his attention. He'd look away distraught and hopeless, worried that no one would be attracted to him.

We started experimenting with him watching porn that starred genderqueer and transgender performers, specifically seeking out porn with Asian American performers. He began to fantasize about some of the bodily possibilities he was seeing, and began to envision a specific body for himself when he found a particular performer he thought matched his biological body type and the energetic qualities he strove to connect with in himself. His hopelessness began to lift.

Then, he asked me if I would watch the porn film with the performer whose embodiment had given him hope and images for his own embodied transformation.

I thought again of my first supervisor, knowing how much she would disapprove. Then I thought about my betrayal of the client with whom I had so unsuccessfully explored her use of pornography and fantasy. Part of the problem, as I now understand it, was that we didn't have the right

kind of images to offer her. She didn't want to identify with the men she saw as perpetrators in the porn, but she wanted to do what they did. I think now about porn made by Courtney Trouble, Madison Young, Tristan Taormino, and Shine Louise Houston. These films would have helped my client imagine ways of being in the world, of being in her body in relation to other bodies. She would have found the images hot, and she could also have read, seen, or heard interviews with the pornographers and actors about their experiences of sexuality and performance. These images would have lessened the stranglehold of her shame.

My supervisor had worried on my behalf that my client was trying to seduce me, insinuating her sexual aggressiveness into the psychotherapeutic relationship by my client's insistence on exploring her fantasies of domination with me. I did not want to repeat the shaming and betrayal with this client by rejecting his attempts to share his experience with me. I agreed to watch the film my trans client was holding as a talisman.

The session after I agreed to watch the film, he came into my office and hesitated before sitting down. Unlike that first office, this one is spacious, with a bookcase filled with writing by radical queer and trans folks, women of color, and kids' books about multicolored and multi-gendered families. He stood in front of the bookcase and looked at the spines of books for a minute before sitting down and beginning to speak.

"So, um, what did you think of the film?" He fumbled a bit, a little shyer than usual, not meeting my gaze the way he usually did.

I smiled at him. "I will tell you, but first I want to know what it was you were hoping I would see. Tell me what you see."

"He's hot," he asserted. Then he laughed, "OK, he's hot, but he seems so at ease with his body—proud of it, you know?" He looked up at me, then back down.

"And the women with him seemed so turned on by him. And it seemed real. He let them touch him and they weren't uncomfortable. And he wasn't either."

We smiled at each other across the room, the sunlight climbing up the wall next to us.

"It just makes it seem like it could be a possibility, you know? That someone could be attracted to him. That maybe someone could be attracted to me like that." He hesitated, like there was something else he was trying to say.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know how to ask this. I mean I know you're my therapist, I respect that. I'm not hitting on you and I don't want it to sound like

I am. But—” he said, looking up at me and then quickly away. He took a deep breath. “Did you think he was hot? I mean, could you, or someone like you, be attracted to someone like him?”

“Could a cisgendered dyke think a trans guy was hot?” I asked him, smiling. I waited until he looked up at me. “Because you want to know if this body that seems like a model for you, of how you could imagine being in the world, was sexy to anyone else. Were the performers having sex with him really enjoying it or were they just acting?”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “I mean, I know it’s porn and so they edit it to look smoother than it was, and they are acting, but the chemistry looked real. I mean, the woman looked like she was really into it, and so did he.”

“You sound certain, now,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, looking up at me again. “It was hot.”

He started laughing, looking delighted at what he discovered he believed.

“Yeah,” I said to him, “it was hot.”

Author’s note: All identifying information about clients has been altered to protect client privacy. Most case examples are composite sketches drawn from issues raised by many clients over the years, with all specificity blurred, changed, and symbolized.

“A Feminist Teaching Pornography? That’s Like Scopes Teaching Evolution!”



CONSTANCE PENLEY

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A feminist teaching pornography? That’s like Scopes teaching evolution!” What could the Reverend Pat Robertson have possibly meant when he chose those words to denounce the course on pornographic film that I have been teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara, since 1993? In a 1994 special of *The 700 Club* on “godlessness in public schools,” he made this remarkable statement, right after declaring my course, “a new low in humanist excess” (which I proudly plan to use as a blurb on my forthcoming book, *Teaching Pornography*). He compared a feminist teaching pornography in the early 1990s to science teacher John Scopes teaching evolution in the mid-1920s, in defiance of a Tennessee law that forbade teaching “any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.”

Similarly agog over the idea of a feminist teaching pornography, was the head of Santa Barbara County Citizens Against Pornography (SBC-

CAP), which operates out of local churches. He first called the UC Santa Barbara chancellor's office, and was then successively passed down to the vice chancellor, the provost, the dean, and, finally, my department chair, demanding that I be fired and my course canceled immediately. He was astonished when this did not happen, but even more so when he discovered that I held a joint appointment in women's studies as well as film studies. How can a feminist be teaching pornography?

Journalists, too, did not get it. "What do feminists think of your course?" was invariably the first question in any interview. I carefully explained to them that I was a film studies professor but also a women's studies professor, and a founding editor of *Camera Obscura*, the longest-running feminist media journal in English. The reporters would then say, "Okay, well, what did *other* feminists think about your course?" Even after I told them I had received nothing but interest and support from feminists on my campus and around the country, they would go off and write that my course had been massively protested by feminists.

I regret that I did not have the chance to similarly confound the US Department of Justice (DOJ) with that seeming paradox of a feminist teaching pornography when I was proffered in 2010 as an expert witness in *United States v. John Stagliano*, a federal obscenity trial in Washington, DC. The DOJ had to subpoena the syllabi for my pornographic film course when I would not turn them over upon request. Not only did I not like the idea of having my classroom materials scrutinized by the government, I also did not want the prosecution to see how I go about teaching pornography as a genre and an industry, as film and popular culture. If they were to read my syllabus closely (or any of my research on women, pornography, art, and popular culture), they might be able to ascertain before the trial how I would testify. They would have understood how this feminist teacher of pornography could easily and with much authority defend the films on trial—Belladonna's *Fetish Fanatic 5*, Joey Silvera's *Storm Squirters 2: Target Practice*, and Jay Sin's *Milk Nymphos*—for possessing (or not lacking) serious artistic and political (feminist) value, not to mention scientific value for having been shown and studied in a level one research university classroom. (Teams of my students helpfully transcribed the indicted videos, briefly turning my class into The Innocence Project for Porn.)

After all, the indicted videos (and one website trailer) created by the star directors of Stagliano's company Evil Angel were basically women's play parties, a popular sub-genre that you can see on HBO's *Real Sex*. How did well-crafted films featuring women exchanging bodily fluids,

with a little light bondage, become the most obscene thing in the land, worth tens of millions to prosecute?

It would have been fascinating to have had the chance to put before the Supreme Court evidence for the artistic and political value of such materials, which can be revealed only by the kind of combined historical, aesthetic/textual, ethnographic, and industrial approaches found in my class. The judge made key appealable errors that would have assured a Supreme Court hearing, such as disallowing expert witnesses and suspending the obscenity statute's holding that the jury deliberate on the charged materials in their entirety. But all this became moot when the case completely collapsed and was summarily dismissed without the possibility of appeal because of prosecutorial ineptness. At least that ineptness and the ensuing humiliation for the DOJ spelled the end of the Bush Obscenity Prosecution Task Force!

That a feminist would teach pornography not simply to denounce it, but to take it up as a serious topic of study in the humanities seemed baffling to all these parties for at least two reasons. From the 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, and now with the resurgence of antiporn feminism in the 2000s, the popular perception of feminism is that it is one and the same with the antiporn movement, even when that movement merges, then and unfortunately again now, with the forces of the religious right and conservative thinking about women and sexuality. The popular perception that all feminists are by definition antiporn is fostered by a media that loves reporting the sensational story of feminism once again, as in the nineteenth century, degenerating into a moral hygiene or public decency movement. This journalistic tack is admittedly juicier than trying to explain the complexities of feminist thought on sexual representation and its impressively wide and diverse range of views.

So, too, the opponents of porn do not believe a feminist could teach pornography because they think it cannot be studied, either because there's nothing there to study (it's so low a cultural form that it doesn't even count as culture) or it is too dangerous to study. The local antiporn activists, for example, accused me of exposing children to pornography in my classroom, to the anger and dismay of my students who vocally spoke out against their characterization as children in letters to the editor of the local paper.

From the religious perspective, it is not only bewildering that a feminist would teach pornography but also a betrayal of an alliance between antiporn feminism and the religious right that began in the early 1980s.

During a forty-five-minute phone conversation with the head of SBC-CAP (a woman, by the way, was the nominal head but a man did all the talking), he gradually realized that this feminist had no intention of leading a new sexual temperance movement but planned to teach pornography as a genre and an industry, as film and popular culture, within a rigorous critical studies media curriculum. I think he understood—and rightly feared—that studying pornography, making it studiable, would put it on the spectrum of all other forms of film and popular culture, thereby normalizing it, maybe even revealing it to be more benign than some of those other cultural instances.

I was astonished to see how the SBCCAP leader's desperation made him show his hand: he confessed that churches can no longer get people to oppose pornography on religious or moral grounds so they need the scientific studies coming out of universities about pornography's harms to make any headway in getting it outlawed. That's why he was so dismayed when he realized that my kind of human science-based research and teaching would not give his group the university-vetted tools it needed to make "scientifically" supported arguments about pornography's harms, its deleterious social effects.

After having made a disappointing visit to the women's studies program in failed hopes of finding natural allies against me, he tried to find other such allies among the noted "porn effects" researchers in the communication department of the social science division, just down the hall from me. Edward Donnerstein and Dan Linz told him they were glad that I was teaching the class because they thought it offered an historical, textual, and institutional context to their quantitative lab studies. (The porn effects professors and I had some interesting discussions, by the way, about our respective disciplinary approaches when I found out they were using violent exploitation films like *Tool Box Murders* as stand-ins for pornographic films in their lab studies to measure the effects of pornography on levels of male aggression. I was also startled to see that they were making their own films for testing by taking an existing porn film and re-editing it to remove any narrative, dialogue, or character—testing with a film that exists nowhere in the natural world.) In a final disappointment to the SBCCAP head, as he was heading out down the hall following his frustrated attempt to enlist the social scientists against me, they told me they gave him this parting shot, "By the way, you've been misusing our data all these years. It doesn't mean what you want it to say." The antiporn activists had been citing their lab studies to claim that exposure to explicit sex makes men more aggressive and causes them to violate and degrade women. But Donnerstein and Linz insisted that

their studies showed no correlation between exposure to explicit sex and increased aggression, although they found a slight correlation with exposure to samples with a more Hollywood mix of sex and violence. And what did this religious antiporn activist offer as his credentials for speaking against the harms of using pornography and teaching pornography? He proudly told me that he'd never even seen an R-rated film.

Neither the good reverend, the religious antiporn activist, the journalists, or probably the federal prosecutors could understand why, on this issue especially, a feminist would be allied with science, a.k.a. secular humanism. "The Evolution Tree," an illustration on the cover of Christopher J. Toumey's fascinating anthropological study, *God's Own Scientists: Creationists in a Secular World*, shows how a belief in biological evolution, with its roots in "unbelief," branches out into the evils of communism, hard rock, humanism, alcohol, abortion, homosexuality, sex education, dirty books, and "wom/child lib," among other moral atrocities.¹ The solution is not to go after each evil one by one but to chop off the biological evolution trunk with the axe of scientific creationism. As Toumey shows, the creationists (or intelligent designers, as they have currently refashioned themselves) believe that the only way to counter establishment "bad" science (based in unbelief) is with their "good" science (based in a literal reading of scripture and an ingenious interpretation of the fossil record). I do not want to overwork the comparison between antiporn activist scholarship and creation science but I do think they are similar in their resistance to theory- and evidence-based science in the name of a superior science based in anecdote, dissident testimony (from recovering porn star "victims"), and biblical views of the proper role of sex and sexual relations. As Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith show in this volume, "Although some recent writings such as the *Everyday Pornography* collection edited by Karen Boyle are presented as though they are academic work, antiporn feminism has generally become increasingly and more openly hostile to scholarly work than in the past. . . . Porn is described as an 'intellectual game' for academics working in environments which 'have been primed to almost robotically generate certain kinds of objections.'" As Boyle puts it, "If you give examples of what women at [antiporn] slide shows say, or feel, or think, academics will say, 'That can't be true because it hasn't been researched,' or 'Show me the evidence of that.'" Here, any feminist adherence to research-based evidence is seen as no more than an act of false consciousness, an academic betrayal of feminism.

So how do the antiporn activists, whose scholarship is driven by ideology/theology, deal with the challenge of scholarship based in historical,

textual, institutional, or ethnographic study? When they pay attention to these methods at all, they discount them by saying that mere textual analysis does not consider institutional issues; that it isn't grounded because it doesn't take its direction from victims and activists; or that it is safe scholarship, crafted to not make waves in the academy. In turn, how do creation scientists deal with the challenge of the fossil record? They say this geological evidence can't be trusted because it has gaps in it, is not vertically sequenced in the assumed evolutionary order, or, the ultimate denial: the creator put those very ancient-seeming artifacts there to test our faith in a young earth whose history can be solely explained by the Flood that happened in the first few days of creation. And most damningly, as with climate change research, they say that scientists are only studying what the establishment will fund them to study, not anything that might threaten elite received wisdom. It would take a great deal more anthropological and rhetorical research to understand why the antiporn activist scholars and creation scientists feel such a strong need to make their arguments in the name of science, even if it is a science on their own terms. Did the head of SBCCAP adequately address why the religious antiporn activists are so fiercely attached to having the imprimatur of science—because people ultimately believe more in science than religion?

Even though antiporn activists of both the religious and scholarly types would reject out of hand anything produced by secular humanist scientists, it is still useful to present the fossil record of porn that can be discovered by teaching porn historically as a genre and an industry, as film and popular culture, with all the methods and tools we take to studying other media and cultural forms. What happens when a class of student researchers asks the same kinds of questions about porn that they have already addressed in their other classes on film and media history and theory; close analysis; genres; digital and new media; independent, experimental, and Hollywood film production, distribution, and reception? How have the styles, strategies, and contents of the genre changed over time? What have been porn's modes of production and distribution? What have been the venues and audiences for porn's reception? What is porn's relation to developing and changing technologies? How has the legal climate in any given era shaped all of the above? Only after getting a grasp of this history can one begin to speak about the multitude of pornographies, rather than a monolithic capital "P" Pornography. Only then can one begin to ask what and whom porn is for. Only then can one begin to make claims about what porn actually is and how its production and consumption interact with all other forms of

production and consumption; and how it has served as a nexus through which almost every moral, aesthetic, political, and philosophical issue can be argued. I offer here some key discoveries of what should be porn's irrefutable fossil record that my students and I make while engaging with the films, readings, and numerous guest lecturers from the mainstream adult industry and its indie edges.

But as a preface, let me say how teaching porn offers the best possible lesson on the nature of academic freedom, an often-misunderstood idea that is so crucial to the free pursuit of knowledge in a university setting. When I first started teaching the course, students would sidle up to me and almost whisper, "How did they let you do it?" I would reply, "Who's the *they*?" I explain to them that no one can object to my teaching and research on moral or religious grounds, not another professor, the university administration, or anyone in government, the churches, or the community. Academic freedom protects the right of free inquiry for teachers and researchers. If I say that I feel the need to teach a class on pornography in a media studies curriculum because it is the most enduring and prolific of all film genres, that there's hundreds of thousands of titles out there, and that it's a multibillion dollar business centered in the San Fernando Valley just eighty miles to the south, then one can only object—again not on moral or religious grounds—by refuting my facts. No, it's not the most enduring and prolific of all film genres . . . Or, they could try questioning my scholarly credentials to carry out such teaching and research—that would be hard. Or, they could try questioning whether my students are capable of dealing with the materials—you've already seen where that got them (as my students insisted, academic freedom should work for them, too). So here are some highlights of what we discovered in that free search for truth that the common good depends on:

Porn isn't what you think it is, whatever you think it is. I always begin my class with the money shot of porn history: *Deep Throat* (1972). Most students have never seen it. They may have heard enough about it that they think they know it, but they don't. They are astonished that it's a real film with a plot, dialogue, character arcs, mise-en-scene, and special effects. It's much more experimental, funny, and over-the-top than they expected, especially in its satire on advertising and mass culture consumption, such as the borrowed advertising jingles and wildly inappropriate product placements for Coke and Old Spice. If the students are really paying attention, they can even see its surprising *Jane Eyre* ending, where the hero is only acceptable to the heroine when he accepts his castration. I also spend a lot of time in the first few weeks of the class on

the stag film, the anonymously produced black-and-white one-reelers shown by peripatetic projectionists in traditional men's spaces such as the fraternal lodge, fraternity house, bachelor party, or back of the barber shop. The students experience quite a surprise, if not an epistemological shock, at seeing people who look like photos of their great-grandparents engaging in oral sex, anal sex, interracial sex, BDSM, girl/girl, bestiality; strapping on dildos, playing with vibrators, pulling on rubbers, and even occasionally slipping a little male homosexuality into the heterosexual mix, something almost never found today.

There's more to learn about porn than you'd ever expect. On the second day of class, I show *Inside Deep Throat* (2005), the documentary by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, produced by Brian Glazer. It features scenes from the movie, news of the time, and interviews, both from the archive and made for the film, with director Gerard Damiano, actor Harry Reems, actress Linda Lovelace, Gore Vidal, Larry Flynt, Hugh Hefner, John Waters, Erica Jong, a prosecutor, Reems' defense, Mafia money collectors, and other people involved in or just commenting on the film. Much of the material was compiled from approximately eight hundred hours of interview and archive footage collected by the filmmakers. The documentary takes on the controversy around the film as a cultural phenomenon and exposes not only the vital and underreported history of obscenity prosecution but the surprising cluelessness of the court about female sexual anatomy. I hold that film up to my students as a high bar of imaginative, in-depth porn scholarship to which they should aspire. *Inside Deep Throat* is the perfect counter to the claim that "There's no there there" when it comes to porn—that is, there's nothing there worth researching.

One's critical stance toward porn is all about taste, especially when it is unconscious or unacknowledged. The class's first reading assignment is to look closely at magazine and news articles written about the class and about the adult industry. In articles in the *New Yorker*, *Hustler*, *Lingua Franca*, *Time*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and others, I ask my students to be on the lookout for the elitist "maneuver" or "turn" that inevitably occurs near the end of the reportage, even when that reportage has been surprisingly accurate and useful. Either the editor or the author feels obliged to offer a conclusion like "But do we really need an entire curriculum devoted to porn—after all it's just dirty movies?" Or the journalists conclude their overviews of the industry with comments on the surprising banality of the people and lives in the adult industry or gratuitous remarks about their bad taste in home furnishings. We learn to detect critics' knee-jerk habit of putting porn in a quarantine zone to

protect their own sensibilities from any porno contagion.² Ideally, we learn not to take this unthinking stance ourselves.

Porn is a Victorian invention. Students learn that explicit erotic imagery has a long history but only became “pornography” when gentlemen scholars decided to lock away in a secret museum the wildly erotic artifacts discovered in the ruins of Pompeii, believing they were the only ones with the education and sensibility not to be affected by them. Again, it is an epistemological shock for my students to realize that porn is not a singular ahistorical thing but largely a social construction prompted, at the very least, by class, taste, and fear. Fenton Bailey, who also co-produced the most informative documentary on porn and the moral panics about its increasing democratization through technological evolution, the six-part *Pornography: A Secret History of Civilization* (1999) for the UK’s Channel Four, is a frequent visitor to our class. His company, World of Wonder, which he runs with Barbato, is the best producer of feature films, documentaries, and television shows about sex, popular culture, and all things queer. We start a conversation with Bailey that carries on throughout the class about the enormous challenges of making serious yet engaging documentaries about porn, including several failed attempts by me and Linda Williams to turn into a film our hugely successful two-hour “History of Hardcore” presentation at the 1994 Telluride Film Festival, and my own thwarted attempt to make HBO’s *Porn 101 with Professor Penley*, which became *Katie Morgan’s Porn 101*.

Porn isn’t lewd for nothing. We read this claim about porn’s social and political function in Lynn Hunt’s *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*.³ The contributors to that volume give a wealth of examples of the way pornography was used during that period to challenge absolutist political authority and church doctrine, variously linked as it was to free thinking, heresy, science, and natural philosophy. But as the genre becomes more mass cultural and increasingly “tasteless,” can we still recognize porn’s historical continuity with avant-garde revolutionary art, populist struggles, or any kind of countercultural impulses? My answer would be “Yes,” taking as the most obvious example the porn parodies of Hollywood that have been with us from 1923’s *The Casting Couch*, with its Mack Sennett-like character abusing his power to get girls on the Keystone casting couch, to 1993’s *The Sperminator*, a gay male film with an Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike, in which John Conner and Kyle Reese get together to sperminate the Sperminator, thus twitting the closeted homosexuality of the body-building world and Hollywood.

Porn is film. In her groundbreaking *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and*

the *"Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989), Linda Williams was the first feminist media scholar, in fact the first media scholar, to produce a historical and theoretical account of a film genre and industry whose low social and cultural status had hitherto made it off bounds to serious scholars.⁴ Drawing on feminist, Marxist, cultural, and psychoanalytic theory; textual and narrative analysis; and archival research, she made the case not only that porn could be studied but that it must be studied to advance both film history and theory, and feminist discourse on sexuality and representation. Her original discovery is that the earliest porn films, the "stags," "blue movies," or "smokers" shared with early silent film the exhilarating promise of showing us things that our unaided eye could not see, either close-up or exotically far away. Porn's cinematic promise was that it could show us the most invisible and unknown of all: the female orgasm, which occurs internally and can even be faked. This discovery leads Williams to the counterintuitive conclusion that porn may indeed speak primarily to male desire, but, at the very least, has to take a long detour through the question of female desire.

Two other related studies that prove exceptionally useful to our comparative understanding of porn as film, as a genre, and an industry, are Eric Schaeffer's brilliant history of porn's kissing cousin, the exploitation film *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1960–1979*, where he illuminates the contours of porn by comparing it to a genre that negotiated in very different ways the demands of representing and distributing films about sex and other taboo subjects.⁵ Jon Lewis's book, *Hollywood v. Hardcore: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (2000) shows how Hollywood fundamentally shaped the future of hard core pornographic film by exiling it from the industrywide Motion Picture Association of America film rating system, pushing sexually explicit films outside the mainstream and, with a series of Supreme Court decisions, outside of theatrical distribution.⁶ These theoretical and historical studies of what pornographic film is and how it came to be counter monolithic claims about everything from the genre's contents to its modes of production, distribution, and consumption. The powerful analyses of these film scholars allow us to understand pornographic film not as some footnote to film history or a minor sideline but a key component of that history.

Porn is popular culture. If Linda Williams's bold move was to drag pornographic film onto the spectrum of all other genres and modes of film production for serious study, other researchers including myself have productively folded porn into the realm of popular culture. A more cultural studies approach focuses on issues of reception/consumption as

well as aesthetics/production, issues that are necessarily going to involve considerations of class, taste, and everyday life. But here, too, close reading is important as a start. In her influential essay “(Male) Desire, (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*,” Laura Kipnis tells us how she made herself overcome what was supposed to be her natural feminine revulsion for the magazine to sit down one day and actually look at it. She discovered that this most reviled instance of mass circulation porn is also one of the most explicitly class antagonistic periodicals of any genre, devoted to skewering every social, political, or intellectual hypocrisy and pretension. Her close reading of *Hustler*’s photos, cartoons, features, ads, and essays also reveals a world where sex is an arena of humiliation for men, not domination of women: “The fantasy life here is animated by cultural disempowerment in relation to a sexual caste system and a social class system.”⁷ *Hustler*, she says, puts into question a male fantasy that represents power, money, and prestige as essential to sexual success and mocks those who believe the upscale promises of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Kipnis was thus one of the first scholars to debunk antiporn activists’ claims about men’s monolithic consumption of porn, as one that revels in dominating and degrading women.

Like Kipnis, Eithne Johnson and Eric Schaefer also convincingly demonstrate the value of analyzing films and cultural materials that are seen as so low as to be unworthy of serious scholarship, from the exploitation film and the beaver film to the urban legend that is the snuff film. I hold up to my students their essay, “Soft Core/Hard Gore: *Snuff* as a Crisis in Meaning,” as a model of research that is interdisciplinary and informed by a wide range of sources including both mainstream and industry newspapers and periodicals, archival accounts, interviews, and meticulous attention to the structure of the film.⁸ In analyzing the controversy around a 1976 exploitation film (originally titled *The Slaughter*) that was given a tacked-on, patently fake (but taken as real) ending where the director comes from behind the camera and tortures and disembowels the female star, they show how the film was deployed to “shift the definition of pornography—from sexual representation to a literal inscription of male dominance over women.”⁹ Once antiporn feminists had an image that could kill, they could easily join “a larger discursive formation regulating low culture by indicting audiences for ‘unhealthy’ appetites, lobbying for social protectionism, policing morally suspect material, and segregating it through combat zone rhetoric.”¹⁰ In other words, if *Snuff* didn’t exist or couldn’t stand in for all the mythical snuff films, antiporn feminists would have had to create it. The undertitle of Kipnis’s book *Bound and Gagged*, in which the *Hustler* study appears

as a chapter, is *Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*.¹¹ Johnson and Schaeffer, too, attend to the politics of that work of fantasy in a cultural phenomenon, “the snuff film,” that is right down there with *Hustler*.

In *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (1998), Jane Juffer adopts a cultural studies approach to make a crucial intervention in what she calls the fruitless debate about whether women in relation to porn are hapless victims or transgressive agents. When some porn scholars give individual films or magazines such as *Snuff* and *Hustler* an overdetermining power to influence the lives of men, women, and children, we can’t even ask, she says, more important if less spectacular questions about how women consume porn in their everyday lives. “What are the material and discursive conditions in which *different kinds* of pornography are produced, distributed, obtained, and consumed?”¹² By studying a range of artifacts including women’s literary erotica, masturbation discourse, adult cable programming, couples’ video porn, cybersex, sex toys for women, lingerie catalogs, and sexual self-help books, Juffer shows how porn is domesticated for women in ways that both challenge and reinforce traditional notions of home and domesticity. Women are active consumers of porn when we expand the genre to a range of products, styles, and representations that address female pleasure.

David Andrews, too, makes an original contribution to understanding pornography in the everyday lives of women by being the first to survey the contemporary softcore feature as a middlebrow form of pornography situated ambiguously between hardcore and Hollywood. Like Juffer, Andrews is critical of feminist porn scholars who have given so much attention to hardcore—especially since one of softcore’s most distinguishing characteristics is having a female protagonist—seen as more transgressive, avant-garde, and “masculine,” while ignoring the “feminine” softness of the softcore genre. Drawing on original industrial research, extensive sampling, and wide-ranging scholarship, *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in Its Contexts* (2006) examines the genre’s history, formal and ideological conventions, sub-genres, styles, and motifs, as well as its most influential studios, directors, and texts.¹³ Andrews meticulously traces the prehistory of the softcore feature from the nudie cuties and burlesque films of the 1930s and 1940s to the sexploitation films of the 1960s and on to today’s softcore features, discreetly ensconced on late-night cable television. We learn a great deal from scholars like Juffer and Andrews who focus on individual texts

and genres, but only to show their meanings in the everyday life uses of women consumers.

A big strength of the cultural studies approach to pornography and issues of taste, class, and everyday life is the inevitable understanding that once you are in the realm of popular culture, everything is impure. Any cultural instance is both ideological and utopian, both containment and resistance, both desirous and anxious. This lesson from Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, and Frederic Jameson, among others, can help feminist porn scholarship avoid pitting my taste against your taste in order to study the work of taste itself.

Porn is racist but there's a lot more to it than that, a lot more. I am not the only porn professor who laments the paucity of work on race in porn. If it weren't for Susie Bright's infamously killed 1986 piece for AVN, "The History of Inter-racial and Black Adult Video" (later published in *Susie Bright's Journal* and now online in *The Erotic Screen*, vol. 1), we would have had nothing on Jim Crow and the adult video, nothing of the voices of the directors and performers who tried to work within and against the worst stereotypes and most terrible prejudices, including Sahara, Jeannie Pepper, Angel Kelly, and, in his own admittedly perverse way, Greg Dark. Bright shows that the adult industry in the 1970s and 1980s was so racist that it didn't even know how to take advantage of an unplundered area of creativity: "For interracial and black videos, there is a vast never-tried zone of creativity and self-expression for interracial and black videos, which could bring riches, as well as honor, to those bold enough to explore it."¹⁴ But she does give one thing to the adult video world, "the trash-talking cousin to Hollywood": "[It] is more honest about their prejudices than their straight industry counterparts. We won't ever hear a Hollywood actress say *in print* that she refuses romantic scenes with a black man."¹⁵

I am extraordinarily fortunate to have as my colleagues Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Mireille Miller-Young (what's the luck of having three porn professors at one university?) who have pioneered the study of that "unplundered area of creativity" and who generously share their research with my students. In *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*,¹⁶ Shimizu moves beyond denunciations of negative sexualized representations of Asian American women to argue for a more nuanced approach, "productive perversity," that allows those women and other women of color to lay claim to their own sexuality and desires as actors, producers, critics, and spectators. She combines theoretical and textual analysis with interviews and eth-

nographic study to consider Asian American women's performances in films ranging from the stag films of the 1940s to the Internet and video porn of the 1990s. Shimizu's most recent book, *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*, is almost a sequel, extending to Asian masculinity the same consideration of resistance and agency she gave to Asian female performance.¹⁷ In her forthcoming book, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women, Sex Work, and Pornography*, Miller-Young introduces the idea of "illicit erotic labor" to capture the efforts of black performers to carve out a successful space for creative expression through self-fashioned performances that attempt to work within and against stereotypes.¹⁸ Her work, too, shows the strength of combining textual, narrative, and performance analyses with in-the-field interviews with black performers from the "golden age," including Angel Kelly and Jeannie Pepper (dubbed by *Hustler*, "the Rosa Parks of Porn," for being the first African American woman inducted into the AVN Hall of Fame) to Afro-geek webmistress Sinna Love. The work of Shimizu and Miller-Young on race in pornography—shown in all of its contradiction and complexity—challenges the essentializing antiporn feminist claim that porn is purely and simply racist with no possibility for any kind of agency or critique from within or without.

Porn is gay or "Why does the gay stuff have to be so good?" In the first years of my class, male students would leave in droves when I got to gay male porn, starting with 1940s and 1950s films from Bob Mizer's *Athletic Model Guild* and continuing through Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand* (1970), Christopher Rage's 1970s and 1980s New York City rough trade films, Joe Gage's "Working Man's Trilogy (1976–1979)," William Higgins's Catalina films, such as *Pizza Boy: He Delivers* (1985), Jerry Douglas's *More of a Man* (1990), and of course all of the great gay male porn/avant-garde crossovers, including Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964). The walkouts would always be a flashpoint in the class, especially when the women, who had staunchly sat through everything, would taunt the men, saying things like, "Afraid you're going to get turned on?!" Now, very gradually, it has almost become uncool to leave, to reveal yourself in that way. I also no longer get the complaint from the anxious male students, "Why does the gay stuff have to be so good?" As film students, they begrudgingly appreciate the relatively greater art and craft of the gay male films in relation to much of the heterosexual product but are still a bit taken aback by how attracted they are to the films as film.

So, too, they can't help but be interested in the very good documentaries on the making of gay male porn films such as Ronnie Larsen's

Shooting Porn (1997), which depicts the distinctive directing styles of Chi Chi LaRue and frequent guest lecturer Gino Colbert. My students also know enough about film to be able to assess the claims about gay male porn and its difference from straight porn by noted gay historians and critics such as Thomas Waugh. His *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (1996) not only unearths the history of moving image gay male film but also serves to rebuke the monolithic antiporn characterization of porn as representations of men degrading and brutalizing women.¹⁹ Other early and key studies that we find useful include Waugh's "Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight"²⁰; Richard Dyer's "Coming to Terms: Gay Pornography";²¹ Kobena Mercer's "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary";²² Richard Fung's "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn";²³ and Earl Jackson Jr.'s "A Graphic Specularity."²⁴ Students are able to get a strong sense from these essays of the greater level of affective investment in porn when the community that is producing and consuming it is an outlawed sexual or racial minority. This is yet another insight that de-essentializes porn as just one thing.

Porn is a business. One of the first assignments in my class is to go to the library and online to compare and contrast the two leading adult industry trade journals, *AVN* and *XBIZ World*, kind of the *Variety* and *Broadcasting and Cable* of porn. Students vaguely know porn is a business, even a big business, but they didn't know it was a *business*, from studios and corporations to mom-and-pop retail stores, with its own news outlets, convention circuits, and trade associations such as the Free Speech Coalition, which manages legal, ethical, legislative, financial, and health issues for its members. In closely examining these journals the students come to appreciate both the scope of the adult industry and also the extraordinary difficulties of making claims about its economics, as Joseph Slade outlines in his chapter on that topic in his invaluable reference guide, *Pornography and Sexual Representation*.²⁵ How can one authoritatively claim that porn is a 10–12 billion dollar industry (a figure that appears to have been pulled out of someone's booty in the 1990s and endlessly repeated by critics, journalists, and mainstream business analysts) when it is difficult to establish what the industry even consists of? We can't know corporate figures because few publically traded companies have ties to the industry and, if they do, they are often buried in much larger revenue reports from other company businesses; we can't account for amateur or indy porn revenues because they are so underground and decentralized; we can't isolate film or video production from

related industries ranging from “novelty” retail (sex toys), dancing, or escorting. And of course Internet business is notoriously hard to quantify, no matter what the industry. To understand how porn is a business in our community, we take a field trip to the local video store. Some of the students compare the more upscale adult store in town, a clean, well-lit place with ten thousand titles from couples’ erotica to backdoor DVDs, to a much more dimly lit, older adult store downtown with “preview booths.” We learn a great deal about the changing business models in the adult industry (gay and straight) from guest lecturers who are trade journalists and critics, studio heads, directors, performers, web mistresses, attorneys, trade association heads, and independent producers of queer, feminist, kink, and alternative varieties

Porn is labor. This is a useful lesson of HBO’s series *Pornucopia: Going Down in the Valley* (for which I served as the academic talking head). I gave the producer Dan Chaykin a great compliment when I told him that *Pornucopia* does for the adult industry what sociologist Howard Becker’s *Artworlds* (1984) did for the world of art production by exploring the cooperative network of artists, suppliers, performers, dealers, critics, and consumers who together “produce” a work of art. I am thankful for my class’s proximity to the adult industry in the San Fernando Valley and north Hollywood and grateful for the generosity of all the people who guest lecture in my class and share both their experiences in the day-to-day operations of the industry and personal details about what it is to create a career in porn. Just a few of them include Candida Royalle, Nina Hartley, Ernest Greene, Annie Sprinkle, Susie Bright, Carol Queen, Tristan Taormino, Gino Colbert, John Stagliano, Veronica Hart, Jeannie Pepper, Eon McKai, Joanna Angel, Kimberly Kane, Dana DeArmond, Bobbi Starr, Buck Angel, Christian Mann, Steven Hirsch, Sinnamon Love, Sean Michaels, Lee Roy Myers, Sam Hain, Jacky St. James, Eddie Powell, Jessica Drake, and Graham Travis. Journalists, documentarians, academics, attorneys, and trade association and health foundation directors include Mark Kernes, Leslie Zemeckis, Fenton Bailey, Dan Chaykin, Jeff Koga, Linda Williams, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Mireille Miller-Young, Allan Gelbard, Jeffrey Douglas, Diane Duke, and Sharon Mitchell. How would it change what we think about pornography if we thought of porn folks not as seedily glamorous porn stars but working stiffs and hungry artists?

Porn is funny. To me and to my students, a surprising feature of the films we survey, from the beginning of the twentieth century to now, is the ubiquitous use of humor, and not just any kind of humor, but bawdiness, humorously lewd and obscene language and situations. And, again

a surprise, the men rather than the women are often the butt of the joke. My essay “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” looks at porn as male popular culture to try to understand what the consumers and producers of everything from early stag films such as *Getting His Goat* (ca. 1923) and post-World War II films such as *The Dentist* (1947–1948), *Doctor Penis* (1949–1952), and *Divorce Attorney* (1996–1997), to tabloid-celebrity porn such as *John Wayne Bobbitt: Uncut* (1994), are *doing* with these films.²⁶ Why would the men who are making these films, presumably for the pleasure of other men, mock and deride the men in the film for their hypocrisies and pretensions, both personal and professional, and their sexual and social ignorance? The close study of porn as male popular culture, a study that understands that popular culture cannot be popular unless it speaks to both the desires and anxieties of its audiences (Cultural Studies 101), reveals that porn is one of the few places in our culture where men are carrying on, humorously and farcically, a critical conversation about the foibles and failings of masculinity. That’s what I love about humanities scholarship: you don’t always discover what you set out to find, here a surprising and important lesson for feminism about how and what pornography means to men, that it is not just an exercise in patriarchal heterosexism.

Porn is sex education, whether you plan it that way or not. When I first knew that I wanted to teach a porn class, I had to decide whether to teach it in women’s studies or film studies. I feared that if I were to teach the class in women’s studies, every student walking into the class would presume that my position would be a simply denunciatory one and that I certainly wouldn’t be showing anything “offensive.” I quickly realized that if I wanted the students to get a theoretical, historical, and institutional grasp on pornographic film *before* they began to offer their (now informed) opinions on it, I had to teach it in film studies, where the students take for granted that their course of study will necessarily entail seeing films that may be difficult, controversial, and downright offensive (if we’re doing our job right). I also knew that our sociology department has offered a renowned class on human sexuality for three decades so I didn’t feel I had to cover that territory in my class either, but could strategically focus on teaching porn as film and popular culture.

I was right not to teach it in women’s studies but wrong to think that my film studies class wouldn’t turn into a big old sex education course. Why? Partly, it’s because of the dismal state of sex education in US schools. Students have to get their sex education wherever they can. I remember sitting next to one of my students one of the first times I taught the class when we saw our first anal sex scene. She slid down in

her seat and, only half covering her eyes, whispered aloud, “I didn’t know you could do that.” With my strategy of treating my porn class just like any other genre class, I don’t give any special warnings or disclaimers: I don’t do it in my other genre class on science fiction film so I don’t do it here. But, if I feel a student is about to humiliate herself or himself, I will offer a gentle reminder that maybe we can’t always presume to know what’s good or bad for someone else, what turns others on or not. I once had a male student pronounce that an oral sex scene we had just viewed was “sexist,” because “everyone knows women hate giving head.” Several female students quickly turned around in their seats to gape at him, me too, before I gathered myself to try figure out a way to let him off the hook of his own sexual ignorance, so embarrassingly displayed. (And, thankfully, I have less and less the problem of male students saying what they think the feminist professor wants to hear, what the politically correct response would be.)

So mainstream porn provides sex education, no matter what you think of it. But another reason my class turned into a sex education class is that both the mainstream industry and the feminist and independent porn movements have taken up sex education as a social benefit, and one with a lot of market potential, especially in women-owned, community-based sex-retail businesses, described in great ethnographic detail in this volume by Lynn Comella. It is probably not surprising that several of the veteran feminist porn performers and sex workers became sexual health educators, including most notably Nina Hartley (RN), Annie Sprinkle, and Sharon Mitchell, former Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation director. (Once when Annie Sprinkle was a guest lecturer in my class she asked me what my students’ sex education experiences had been like. I said I didn’t know and so she promptly asked my students. Their responses ranged from abstinence-only programs, to fairly informative middle school classes, to “the nuns passing a fetus in a jar around the classroom.”) Susie Bright and Tristan Taormino are sex writers and journalists who became sex educators, with Taormino a good example of a newer generation of sex educator turned pornographer who sees her filmmaking as a way to address some of the interpersonal and social issues around sex, especially the place of fantasy and role-playing. I knew for sure that my class had become sex education central when the campus’s sex and relationship peer counselors asked me to regularly reserve six to eight places in my class for them. Finally, I realized that there’s such a hunger out there for a nonjudgmental place where people can talk and learn about sex. I guess my class is it.

Porn is good pedagogy. Every one of us who teaches a class on por-

nography or, more often, integrates sexually explicit material in classes on more general topics such as representation and sexuality or gender and the law, feels obliged to offer advice about how to teach it. My advice, from all of my experience, can be summed up in one maxim: never make an exception of pornography. This principle leads to pedagogical strategies that may run counter to others' advice, especially the almost knee-jerk requirement that the instructor must issue warnings or disclaimers about the class materials and allow students to leave the class if any distress occurs, in the name of showing one's sensitivity to the goal of providing a safe and comfortable space where a free and tolerant exchange can happen. Who doesn't want a class where a free and tolerant exchange can take place? But is pre-framing the class as deviant and dangerous the best way to do it? Is it a good idea to *suggest* to the students in advance that they may be so traumatized by the course materials that they may have to flee at some point? Not only are the warnings disrespectful and patronizing to the students, they also offer the instructor no real cover (although it may make you feel more caring and conscientious) and, indeed, put a target on the class. Of course it helps that "porn" is in the title of my class—no one can say "I wasn't expecting it!" I also don't try to "protect" my students by making my classroom an inviolable space—its contours are quite fluid. Although I ask them not to invite their entire sorority, basketball team, or residence hall floor to screenings and guest lectures, they are free to bring one or two or three dorm mates, lovers, or old friends from out of town. They have even brought their parents. I also don't try to protect them from the press. If a journalist wants to attend a class or talk to students, I ask the students what they want to do. They've never said "No," and have had some interesting discussions and occasional disagreements if not altercations with them if they think they are misrepresenting the class. My students have even told me that they're disappointed the class doesn't get protested anymore because they felt that dealing with the protestors, writing letters to the editor, and so on was an important part of their experience of the class. (The SBCCAP folks ended up begging me to stop telling reporters that they were protesting my class because they feared being portrayed as "bigoted book burners" and losing any community support they had.)

I also don't allow others to exceptionalize my class, especially if they are trying to "help." In 1994, for example, we had a pornography focus group in our interdisciplinary humanities center that wanted to put on a one-day conference on pornography as part of a yearlong, statewide series of conferences on Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation. The speakers were a stellar lineup of scholars and writers

who studied pornography from diverse disciplines, including Linda Williams, Walter Kendrick, Anne McClintock, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Dan Linz, and Susie Bright. The humanities center director insisted that we invite Catherine MacKinnon to represent “the other side,” and I replied, “What other side, the side that doesn’t believe in interdisciplinary scholarship?” The acting dean further insisted that we put warnings on all of the publicity materials for the conference and ring the building with extra security, just in case, and to check IDs at the door to make sure no one under eighteen got in. I refused, of course, and asked them if they were planning to take the same precautions with the upcoming conference on the troubles in Northern Ireland. I have never had the least problem with my choice not to police or therapize my class, except *once* when a student brought a friend who was a little too drunkenly enthusiastic over having Nina Hartley as the guest lecturer. One of the reasons why I want to keep my class open is that it facilitates the best thing about my class: it keeps on teaching. My students tell me that the minute they leave class, they must report to their roommates, friends, parents, folks back home in Australia, what went on in class that day. They constantly have to explain the class, why it’s important to study pornography, why it’s crucial to have informed opinions. They dine out on the class for years to come: “You took that pornography class?! Tell us all about it.” It’s the class that keeps on teaching.

Notes

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Cum Guzzling Anal Nurse Whore: A Feminist Porn Star Manifesta



LORELEI LEE

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I've been working in pornography for over ten years. That is my entire adult life. More images exist of me performing naked—or more accurately, performing in lip gloss, false eyelashes, stilettos, latex, lingerie, and all manner of other symbolic accoutrements and scraps of skimpy fabric—than images of me doing anything else.

I didn't choose this profession as a political act. You will not hear me say that I decided to get naked because I believed it would be sexually liberating or empowering. I'm not going to tell you that when I took off my clothes in front of the camera for the first time, I immediately knew I was on a path to self-discovery. The journey of the last ten years was not something I planned, and the truth of my experience is much more complicated than the public discourse on pornography and sex—shouted out in large, bright headlines from magazine and newspapers—would have you believe. What I can tell you is that as I continued to do this work—as I came up against my own ideas about femininity, power, and sex—I found strength in the part of my identity that developed out of my experiences as a sex worker. I found a manifesto of my own ethics, and I found that, to my surprise, I believe deeply in the positive power of sexually explicit imagery.

I am a feminist, and I am a pornographer. I have been paid for sexual performances of every kind. After a lot of reckoning, I've come to believe that the work I continue to do makes the world a better place for women to live in.

This, of course, is a story that has been written before. Though it took some time for me to discover the radical, sex-positive writings of feminists like Nina Hartley, Patrick Califia, Carol Queen, Tristan Taormino, Annie Sprinkle, and Dorothy Allison, I did finally discover them, and their work has provided necessary comfort and advice for me during the last decade. Lately however, I've read an onslaught of sensationalist books and articles about pornography, feminism, violence against women, exploitation, prostitution, and/or how feminism and/or pornography have affected the libidos of men and the "success" of women at landing long-term partners (see "The End of Men" in *The Atlantic*, "Why Monogamy Matters" in the *New York Times*, "Why Are Men So Angry" in *The Daily Beast*, "How Porn Is Affecting the Libido of The American Male" in *New York Magazine*). These articles swim in my head—they provide a dizzying view of attitudes about sexuality in the US, using lurid soft-focus photos and reports of the writer's own porn viewing, or the porn viewing of someone they know, that almost invariably offers only a narrow platform for an ideological argument, rather than any kind of thoughtful or encompassing analysis. Opinion pieces are fine, but I'm hungry for something more.

When it comes to pornography, it seems that anyone who has ever seen a naked image feels empowered to offer a definitive perspective, but these interpretations rarely allow for the tremendous range of experiences through which pornography enters people's lives. Many of the authors of recent books and articles on porn fail to take into account how race, class, religion, region, gender, and orientation affect the conditions under which adult material is viewed or analyzed. They disregard the variations in what is considered "pornographic," and they don't consider the larger societal conditions under which the homogeneity of the bulk of American-produced adult imagery is directly correlated with hundreds of years of stereotyped expectations of femininity. They fail to realize that these ideas of femininity might be reflected in some porn, but are not caused by it, and neglect to address the adult imagery being made that directly combats these stereotypical expectations. Finally, the authors of these pieces seem to hold the porn-viewing audience in low regard, forgetting that pornography—like other forms of consumable narrative—is ultimately a genre of fantasy, and that the vast majority of

its viewers are entirely aware of its unreality. In fact, the reason why so much of pornography is even sexy is because it strays so far from what most people expect or even want in their real lives.

These are the points I'd like to discuss here. But first, the answer to the question that gets asked at every cocktail party, in every classroom, and online discussion forum: How did a nice, smart girl like you end up in a job like this?

I am a feminist by birth. I was raised with feminism in the same way people are raised with religion. I come from a line of fierce women who have taken what they were given and made what they needed out of it.

I was born in a welfare clinic. My mother took me home from the clinic to the low-income apartment she'd found with the help of the nuns from the Catholic home for girls where she'd stayed during her pregnancy. She had spent a year in community college and three semesters at the University of California, Berkeley, on a gymnastics scholarship before getting pregnant and dropping out of school.

In college, my mother discovered the newly academicized field of women's studies, but she was a feminist long before her time in California. She'll tell you she was a feminist before she knew the word—since the day, at the age of ten, when she realized that women were not allowed to become priests, and her own mother told her that because she was so smart and strong-willed, she could probably be the first female priest if that was what she really wanted to be. She'll tell you she became a feminist that day; she believed she could be whoever she wanted.

It's likely that I get my desire to perform from my grandmother. When she was a teenager, my grandmother worked at a dime store, playing songs for a nickel apiece on the piano, often for sailors and soldiers on leave. Soon after that, she was an entertainer in the USO. Even after the war ended, after she married and had nine children in as many years, my grandmother returned to the stage for regional productions in the small upstate New York town where she lived. Once she played Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*. My mother—a teenager then—was shocked to see her mother singing on stage in only a slip. My grandmother doesn't know what I do for a living, but I know she understands the thrill of captivating an audience. I know that as a dime-store piano player, she learned the art of presentation—of selling a kind of fantasy of accessibility.

My mother, though not a performer, has a different kind of public fearlessness. By the time I was five years old, I had campaigned door-to-door in a stroller for low-income housing and the Equal Rights Amendment. I'd ridden an overnight bus to Washington, DC, to march on the capitol for abortion rights. My wardrobe was screen-printed with politi-

cal slogans like Take Back the Night, Women Unite, and The ERA is for My Future.

My mother still likes to tell the story of the time I attended kindergarten in a t-shirt emblazoned with a red banner: *Reproductive Freedom: A Woman's Right*. My kindergarten teacher called me to her desk to tell me that my clothing might not be appropriate for someone my age. She asked me if I even knew what my t-shirt meant. I've been told I replied, "Mrs. Bell, if a woman can't decide what to do with her own body, how can she possibly be in control of the rest of her life?" There—you might think—lies the root of a rationale for all my future economic choices.

I was in the sixth grade the first time someone called me a slut. That person, you might be surprised to hear, was my mother. It was my first day of middle school, and I had decided to wear a white t-shirt, a pair of purple shorts, a beaded necklace, and black lace-up boots with a two-inch heel. I was proud of this outfit. I felt good in it.

In the years between kindergarten and sixth grade, my family had—for a number of reasons—moved twelve times. My mother married, had another child, and divorced. She became ill, and we moved from apartment to apartment as she changed boyfriends and jobs. I was about to start at yet another new school, and first impressions were crucial. I believed that this outfit made me look unique, what my mother called "artsy."

When I walked into the kitchen that morning, my mother stood in her nightgown stirring a cup of coffee. She looked at me and grunted under her breath.

"What?" I said. In addition to a newly developing sense of personal style, I was just beginning to learn the adolescent art of intoned insolence.

My mother looked me up and down before she said, "Is that what you're wearing?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's just that—" she paused, proceeded slowly, "People might think you're kind of a slut." She said the word with a certain hesitance, like she wasn't sure if she should tell me, but she believed it was necessary, for my own good. As a woman who had lived through years of social and familial shaming for being an unmarried Catholic mother, she may have had good reason to believe she was acting in my best interest.

In that moment, I felt a flood of anger, disgrace, and the surging hormones of adolescence. I couldn't deny the power of that word. *Slut*. In my mother's mouth, it carried a humiliating weight I cannot describe. I stormed out of the kitchen.

Because I was learning to be insolent, I wore the outfit anyway. I

don't remember anyone else commenting on my clothes that day, but I do remember this: the feelings I had that morning getting dressed—of confidence, strength of identity, and pride in my own self-expression—were subsumed for the rest of the day by the impulse to hide and hunch my shoulders, my mother's voice echoing in my ear.

This, I later realized, was the problem with my mother's brand of feminism. She had taught me that without exception, my body was my own, that I was the only one who could decide what to do with it. But as I grew into an age when that decision-making process had actual implications, I learned that there were rigid limits to what I should choose.

I can hear my mother now, saying that there is a tremendous gap in both significance and relevance between the right to wear high-heeled boots and the right to safe and affordable contraception and prenatal care. But of course, even she would recognize that a world in which women are taught that their appearance—and not their words and actions—is what signals their sexual availability, is a world in which women can never be free or equal. And yet that is, for now, the world we live in.

I began working in pornography not because I wanted to have another argument with my mother, and (mostly) not because I wanted to wear high-heeled boots. I needed the money.

I want to be clear about the level of need I'm describing here. Only very rarely have I felt compelled to take a sex-work job because I believed I was truly in danger of losing my home or my ability to feed myself. I've never done what's often called "survival" sex work. What this work has mainly provided for me is something on the second level of Maslow's pyramid—safety and financial security, and the opportunity to reach for that little self-actualization triangle at the top of the pyramid through access to higher education. While I don't want to underestimate the shift in the quality of my life made possible by having those second-level needs fulfilled, I also want to emphasize that my ability to choose adult-industry jobs in which I felt safe and respected (at least as respected as I ever felt in service-industry work), was undoubtedly affected by the kind of needs I was aiming for.

I did my first nude photo shoot when I was nineteen. The photos and short video clips the producer shot that day were for a "college co-eds" themed website. I was not in college at that point, but I hoped to be. I used the money from that first shoot to move to San Francisco, where I began classes at San Francisco State University (SFSU). I believed the photo shoot was a one-time deal, something that provided a necessary paycheck, but not something that I would do again.

During my first two semesters at SFSU, I worked seven to noon at a

daycare center, took classes from noon to four, worked at a coffee shop from 4:30 until 8:30, and then did my homework at night while eating bowls of canned soup, my clothes invariably covered in spoiled milk and baby vomit. During my third semester of college, in an effort to streamline my schedule, I gave up the job at the daycare and added more hours at the coffee shop. I worked opening shifts, freezing in the dark while waiting for the train at four thirty in the morning to get to work by five. I worked five days a week and went to school on my two days off.

I wanted to finish school and become a writer. I didn't know how one became a writer, but I knew that I couldn't string the words together into clear sentences when I was exhausted all the time. Because I had already done one photo shoot—had already ruined my political career—it was easier for me, sometime toward the end of my third semester, to consider nude modeling. I picked up copies of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and *San Francisco Weekly* and began circling back-page ads. I quit my job at the coffee shop and relied on photo shoots, and eventually film shoots, for my income.

At first, my experiences posing nude for money were not exceptionally different from my experiences with other kinds of work. That is to say, I showed up, put on a uniform, and followed directions. The men I worked for were mostly professionals in software engineering or other tech fields who had purchased expensive cameras and draped their living rooms with sheets of fabric in their own approximations of an “erotic” photography studio. Occasionally, I worked for an amateur pornographer or a foot fetishist or a bondage aficionado. Sometimes they asked me to smoke cigarettes or masturbate or hold my toes in a very particular way. Though I was getting paid to be naked in the homes of strangers, this kind of work felt neither bad nor exciting. I thought maybe I would write about the experience, but I found it to be so repetitive that when I sat down with my pen and notepad, I didn't have a whole lot to say about it.

Sometime during that first year, I had discovered Natacha Merritt's book of photography *Digital Diaries*. I'd grown up with Georgia O'Keefe prints, and Merritt's work struck me as a fresh presentation of the concept—the female body self-presented, with an allowance for decoration, vividity, glitter, and—most importantly—*desire*. As I posed for dozens of amateur photographers, I entertained the hope that I might once have an opportunity to be part of making something that beautiful. But making something beautiful was not my priority—making rent was—and so I didn't seek out the photographers who were artists; I looked for the ones who paid well. I found that there was an inversely proportional relation-

ship between the number of times a photographer called his own work “art” and the amount he paid per hour.

This is how I went from nude model to porn performer. Since I wasn’t the one behind the camera choosing the composition, I found that the difference in my own experience of the work—between a masturbation shoot during which the camera was framed on my face (“art”) and a masturbation shoot during which the camera was framed on my crotch (“porn”)—showed up only in my paycheck. The more I got paid, the better I felt about the work. After the first year, I stopped working for still photographers entirely, and moved on to the much better paying solo video shoots. Not long after that, I moved on to performing in girl/girl shoots, and later to boy-girl, and eventually to shoots with everyone on the gender spectrum. For the first three years, I didn’t even look at the images that came out of these shoots. The extent of my experience happened in that room—there was the job and then there was the paycheck. But eventually, of course, I had to look.

When I told my mother I was working in pornography, she cried. I didn’t expect her to be happy for me, but her tears actually shocked me. She said she worried I was being “exploited.” This was the first real blow to my confidence in my decision making.

I was lucky that my closest friends worried only about my safety. If they had any moral qualms or emotional concerns about my job, they kept them to themselves. The people I dated, however, were another story. One lover asked me what had happened to me that “made” me “this way.” Another shouted to the bartender one night, “my girlfriend’s a porn star,” in an attempt to get free drinks; in bed one night after we’d had sex, she asked me how much that would have cost her. More than one of my lovers called me a whore—sometimes this was meant as a term of endearment, other times it was to be cruel. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been aware of the possibility of these reactions; it was that I truly didn’t expect them from people who *knew* me. And I couldn’t have anticipated how being called a whore would make me feel. Mostly it made me feel a strange kind of dissonance—mostly it struck me as a gap in definitions. *If I am a whore, I thought, that word doesn’t really mean what you think it means.*

In addition to the reactions of people I knew, there were the reactions of people I didn’t know. In 2003, I worked my first adult-industry convention. In Las Vegas, for the first time, I met fans. I shook their hands in the lobby of the Stardust and posed for pictures in a corset and mini-skirt. I was twenty-two, and I was startled to confront the reality of my audience. Back at home, I logged onto the Internet and began to read the

reactions people wrote to my video images. I was startled to discover the power of the persona that I had—almost inadvertently—created.

It wasn't until after this discovery that I began to willfully shape that persona. This was a revelation. It was a discovery that came down to costuming. At the same time that I was coming out as a sex worker and a whore—unpacking those terms and coming to realize how their connotations did and didn't apply to me—I was discovering my identity as a queer femme. This was a moment when so many of my influences converged. There was my mother who had dressed me always in denim and boots, who believed that lipstick and Lady Bic were tools of the patriarchy. There was the related kind of second-wave feminist lesbian aesthetic I'd grown up around—an image of “androgyny” that I never felt an affinity for, and a stereotype of lesbianism that made me think I couldn't possibly be queer because I didn't want to wear the outfit. And then there was my work in porn—work in which the aesthetic is fetishized, in which I learned the transformations made possible by costuming, and the ways that I could make a play out of my gender presentation, and my presentation of sexual cues, without it having anything necessarily to do with my internal sense of self. In other words, I learned who I was—in terms of my sexual and gender identity—by pretending, in a very exaggerated way, to be who I wasn't. This is how being a sex worker intertwines for me with being a feminist and being queer.

While performing naked never felt bad or wrong to me, being called a whore at cocktail parties and in my lovers' bedrooms had an impact. Pretty quickly, I had to ask myself whether I believed that what I was doing was worth the social consequences. Reflexively, it was easy for me to say yes. Because I'd been raised with a belief in my own sexual and bodily autonomy, and because I'd never felt coerced into performing, my first reaction to criticism was anger. I knew that I'd chosen to continue to do this job because it was the best financial choice for me—because the benefits outweighed the costs. When my lovers questioned that choice, I felt they were dismissing my rational capability. Though I knew my mother's concern came out of love, I thought her assertion that I'd been exploited was the same as her saying I didn't know any better, that I wasn't adult enough to make my own decisions—and maybe that is exactly what she meant. But my mother is also the woman who always taught me that I was the only one who could determine right and wrong. My mother is the woman who taught me how history has proven that the beliefs and values of the majority can be monstrously in opposition to real ethics and justice, that mores are not morals, and that if I ever want to be able to make choices, I better work to develop my own careful

moral compass. My mother is the one who told me that I have to make the most difficult decisions on my own.

Taking a step back from my personal relationships, the societal idea of women's exploitation deserves another look. The idea that jobs in the sex industry are resorted to out of economic need—or lack of better economic choices—is often cited as evidence that the adult industries are exploitative. The relationship between porn producers and performers is then seen as a kind of economic coercion. This idea assumes that performers are somehow lessened or devalued by their performances in a way that is not compensable by their earnings. An extension of this kind of thinking is the oft-repeated false axiom that women in porn are “forced” to do more “extreme” performances as their careers continue and they need to earn more money.

These ideas come out of a combination of two worn-out and insulting gendered sexual myths. First, that a woman's sexuality has a finite value—that she somehow loses sexual desirability as her number of partners or experiences increases. And second, that female sexuality is categorically different from male sexuality—that no woman wants to have “that kind” of sex (or perhaps any kind of sex at all). While there may be examples of performers who have felt some kind of pressure from a particular agent or director (the industry, like all industries, is comprised of both scrupulous and unscrupulous people), it is just as easy to count women with long porn careers who will tell you they chose to do each of their at-work performances as freely as many people choose to work in office buildings—and many of these women never perform in the more “extreme” or “hardcore” genres.

Also disregarded by this line of thinking are those of us who graduate to what are considered more “extreme” on-camera acts (including anal sex, double-penetrations, fisting, and any number of “fetish” activities) because we're interested in pushing our bodies in an athletic sense, or because we want to create a certain kind of performance, or because we believe this kind of imagery is necessary because it more closely approximates our own desires. I know that my own on-camera performances didn't actually become interesting to me, didn't feel much different from punching a clock, until I began to create performances that felt physically challenging—and were thus dubbed “extreme” or “hardcore.” Participating in these hardcore performances, and watching other women joyfully, breathlessly explore the limits of their own bodies was where I first began to find that elusive thing I'd indirectly sought since first stepping in front of a camera—physical beauty.

This is when working in pornography truly became exciting to me.

I realized that for years I had looked at images of women in fashion magazines and mainstream narrative films and television shows who had presented an idea of “sexy” that seemed synonymous with “pretty.” Countless times I’d looked at women on billboards with perfectly curled hair and immaculately made-up faces, women in movies whose role had been to stand coyly bathed in a certain kind of light and wait to be kissed, wait to say yes or no. Women who flirted but never asked for what they wanted. Women who knew that sex was inextricable from love and that love was usually the precursor to marriage. Even now, female characters who stray from this stereotype in movies or TV shows usually end up dead at the end of the film—or are punished with disease, abandonment, or social isolation.

Pornography, for me, was the antidote. It was on set that I first saw women taking full control of a sexual encounter. Women acting as the sexual aggressors. Women whose makeup became smeared, whose hair was sweat-gnarled, who were contorted and bent in decidedly un-pretty shapes, covered in spit and sweat and lube, laughing or shouting in a full-throated testament to the human capability for joy.

And it was on set that I was first asked this powerful question: What do you want to do? There is a kind of irony in the fact that people so often link pornography with coercion, when it is on porn sets that I really learned what it is to give consent. Never in a civilian sexual encounter had I been explicitly asked what I was and wasn’t willing to do with my body. Never before had someone presented me with a list of options or said, “I want to do these three things today, how does that sound?”

The first time I was asked the questions “What do you like?” and “What do you want to do?” I couldn’t answer them. I didn’t know what I liked, because no one had ever asked me before. It wasn’t until I’d tried some things, talked about others, and watched other women perform, that I began to know what kind of performances I wanted to create and how those overlapped and didn’t overlap with the things I wanted to do off camera.

When I say that pornography is good for women, I mean that sexually explicit imagery in which women are shown giving performative demonstrations of their own sexual power is imagery that can transform the cultural paradigm and ultimately change the world. While there are certainly pornographic productions that don’t show women in roles that are any different from those of women in the mainstream media—productions in which women aren’t shown as having agency or internally fueled desire—there are also plenty of adult films being made in which aspects of women’s sexuality are being performed in ways you’ll

never see in the mainstream media. These are films that seldom receive cultural analysis on the newsstand. These are films that show the full ugly-sexy beauty of women's bodies. Some of these films are directed by women—like Kylie Ireland, Tristan Taormino, Nina Hartley, Belladonna, Courtney Trouble, Princess Donna, or Madison Young (just to name a small sample). Some of these films are powerful simply because the female performers in them—women like Annette Schwarz, Claire Adams, Sasha Grey, or Adrianna Nicole—bring their own raw power to every performance they give.

Part of the problem in national discourse is that distinctions between different kinds of pornographic images are so infrequently made. We can't even get to that discussion, of course, because we don't know what we mean when we say "pornography." The word has been used to describe everything along a spectrum that reaches from *The Color Purple* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to the work of art photographers Larry Clark and Robert Mapplethorpe (whose primary intention is not necessarily to titillate or arouse), to the work of Anais Nin, Anne Rice, and even Madonna (whose primary intention might be to arouse), to the heavily airbrushed pages of *Playboy* and the softcore of late-night HBO, to the mainstream hardcore productions of companies like Digital Playground, Vivid, and Wicked Productions, to the artful fetish productions of Evil Angel and the conscientious BDSM of Kink.com, to the scatological films of Ira Isaacs and Marco Fiorito. If you ask someone whether they believe that pornography is a societal problem, you have no way of knowing where along that spectrum lie the images that are evoked in their mind by the word.

And of course determining the intention and level of explicitness of a production (two elements of concern in the legal classification of obscenity) doesn't even begin to take into account the working conditions under which an image was made or the sociopolitical impact of the finished piece. In my mind, it is these last two categories that must be examined in order to determine the moral and ethical justness of that image (two elements that are ostensibly of concern to groups as disparate as feminists, "compassionate conservatives," and cultural pundits).

Similarly, if I tell someone that I perform in pornography, I have no idea what they imagine: posing for stills in white lace lingerie on a canopied bed; posing in fishnets and eyeliner for a punk, tattooed "alternative" Suicide-Girls-style photo shoot; flogging a bound man while fully dressed in latex; playing the wife, schoolgirl, or secretary in a fully-plotted, high-production-value, mainstream, heterosexual adult feature; or getting fisted by a transgender man in an independent queer film. Each

of those scenarios is bound to evoke a different reaction in the mind of the person who imagines it, and each scenario might have a very different sociopolitical impact and context—an impact and context that are not necessarily at all related to the working conditions under which the images were made. Whether you think I am a feminist, or even a moral person, has everything to do with your own definition of what pornography is, and yet when arguments about pornography are made, the word is almost always used without further explanation—as if we all “know it when we see it.”

During the summer of 2010, I was called to be a witness for the defense in the federal obscenity case brought by the Department of Justice (DOJ) against pornographer John Stagliano and his company Evil Angel; two adult films that I had performed in were part of the indictment. These were films that showed consenting adults in sexual performances that were often lighthearted and joyful—in which the performers are frequently smiling and laughing—images very different from what most people assume when they hear the phrase “obscenity prosecution.” This prosecution represented an aggressive leap on the part of the DOJ, and it would have had far-reaching impact on the adult film industry if the government had been successful. Ultimately, the government was not. I mention this trial only because it was, for me, a stark and terrifying reminder of the real harm incurred by a national discourse that fails to distinguish between matters of ethics and matters of taste.

Explicit adult imagery is, of course, not for everyone. There are plenty of people who would rather never look at porn. That should be their right. But there are also many adults for whom pornography is part of a healthy sex life. And there are adults who’ve found that pornography provides a positive view of their own sexuality that is the antithesis of what they’ve found in other forms of public media. This is true for women, but it is also true for queer people, kinky people, and every other form of alternative sexual identity. In order for ethically made, high-quality, aesthetically and sociopolitically valuable adult imagery to continue to be made, it is essential that we develop more nuanced, discerning, and thoughtful cultural discourse about both pornography and sex.

After reading the recent crop of antiporn books and articles, I’m left with the impression that many of the people in this country start from a place of assumption that to work in pornography is, for women, a fate close to death. It seems to me that this attitude is directly related to attitudes that describe sexually active women as “fallen” or “disgraced.” That women’s sexuality is still viewed as nothing more than currency for gaining a marriage partner, that women are still considered the “gatekeepers”

in heterosexual relationships, does the double evil of making women responsible for every sex act that occurs—consensual or not—and somehow simultaneously disallows the possibility that they might ever have physical desires of their own.

Women are constantly being told by studies and surveys, by newspapers and magazines, that they want sex less than men want sex. But I have yet to see a survey or study that takes into account the dramatic difference in social consequences for men and women in consenting to a sexual act—and the effect that the expectation of social consequences might have on the self-reporting of desire. Women can never gain equal social footing as long as their sexual desires are not viewed as equal to men's desires.

A recent article in the online magazine *Slate* was titled “Sex is Cheap: Why Young Men Have the Upper Hand in Bed, Even When They’re Failing in Life.” I won’t be the first to point out that the major flaw in Mark Regnerus’s article is his underlying assumption that all heterosexual sex outside of marriage can be classified as “pre-marital,” and that a young woman’s ultimate goal and reason for having sex with a young man is to ensnare him in a long-term relationship.¹ Pair that assertion with the idea that young men’s desire is for “access to sex without too many complications or commitments” (according to Regnerus), and you have a twisted and outdated concept of gendered sexual attitudes that affects the way scientific research is done (see the study Regnerus quotes in his article for an example of this) and ultimately affects the way young people view the “normalcy” of their own desires.

Gendered sexual stereotypes such as these are both the cause and effect (in a maddening chicken-and-egg scenario) of the unbelievably manipulative coverage that porn performers receive in mainstream media. Watch Diane Sawyer interview Belladonna or Tyra Banks interview Sasha Grey—pay attention to the music and voiceovers, the questions they are asked.

Let me just pick one tiny moment out of the sensationalist opera of these interviews: At one point, Sawyer says in voiceover that Belladonna, in her work as a porn performer, contracted chlamydia, “a disease that can cause sterility.” All porn performers in the “heterosexual” industry (which includes performances of both heterosexual and lesbian sex)² are tested every four weeks, at minimum, and would (unlike most sexually active adults) learn very quickly that they had a contracted an STD, would not continue to work, and would be treated long before that STD could cause the long-term effects Sawyer describes.³ Sawyer’s attitude is

just one example of the illogical hysteria that permeates both pop culture and news media reactions to porn.

This hysteria is a result of the ubiquitous, gendered sexual myth and stereotyping that both men and women have been fed for hundreds of years. To paraphrase what I told my kindergarten teacher in 1986: If a woman isn't trusted to make decisions about her own body, if she isn't allowed that autonomy by law or societal attitude, how can she be seen as autonomous in the rest of her life? This is a question that applies not only to the women who make pornography, but to the many women who purchase and consume adult materials, and who have been emboldened to claim empowered sexual desire as a part of their healthy adulthood.

To further respond to Sawyer's fears regarding health and safety in the adult industry—fears more recently represented in the public policy hearings led by the AIDS Healthcare Foundation and the Los Angeles County Health Department—the needs of adult-industry workers will never be adequately addressed as long as those workers are seen as exploited victims. The rhetoric around this conversation too often paints the performers themselves as less-than-human caricatures who have no sense of the risks their job involves. Long-term performers have more awareness of the health risks of their jobs and the kinds of regulations that would increase their on-the-job health and safety than anyone outside of the industry (as opposed to the kinds of regulations that would further drive the industry into secrecy and away from the already limited reaches of legal accountability). This is one of the arenas in which feminist sex workers are fighting for visibility—in the battle to separate the needs of consenting sex workers from the needs of trafficking victims—people who are actually being exploited and coerced.

Until these kinds of distinctions are made in the public discourse, it is unlikely that they will be reflected in public health policy, the law, or social, anthropological, and biological research. The amorphous monolith we call “pornography” is just a microcosm reflective of, and influenced by, the attitudes toward sexuality held by society as a whole. The queer and feminist movements' most powerful rhetoric has always been that of freedom of choice and self-definition. Sexual desire and sexual identity are absolutely essential to the freely defined self. Images that explicitly express the vast multiplicity of those desires communicate something larger and more basic to humanity than can be put into words. If those images should be criticized, they should be criticized individually, with consideration for both the context of their appearance and the context of their creation. Pornography is not one thing. It is a

living, breathing genre and represents the creative will of hundreds of people on any given day. Many of the people behind the creation of those images are feminists, and our will is both powerful and far-reaching.

Notes

1. Also see Violet Blue, "Why That Slate Magazine Article Pissed You Off (And Why You Should be Livid)," *Tiny Nibbles*, February 26, 2011, <http://www.tiny nibbles.com/blogarchives/2011/02/why-that-slate-article-pissed-you-off-and-why-you-should-be-livid.html>.

2. In the gay male porn industry, which includes performances of male/male sex as well as bisexual scenes, condom use is mandatory, but STI testing is not.

3. For an extended conversation on this topic, read Ernest Greene, "Latest HIV-in-Porn Panic: Rumor Control Re-opens for Business," *The Blog of Pro-Porn Activism*, June 14, 2009, <http://bppa.blogspot.com/2009/06/latest-hiv-in-porn-panic-rumor-control.html>.

Pornography: A Black Feminist Woman Scholar's Reconciliation



ARIANE CRUZ

Ariane Cruz is an assistant professor in the Department of Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University. She earned her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in African diaspora studies with a designated emphasis in women, gender, and sexuality. Her research interests include images of black female sexuality, black visibility, and pornography. She is currently working on a manuscript exploring black women, BDSM, and pornography. Her teaching at Penn State includes classes on feminist visual culture, and representations of race, gender, and sexuality.

She cannot help herself from thinking: Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy:
Depressing.
This does not excite or stimulate.

—Alice Walker, Porn¹

Forty years ago, Alice Walker wrote an honest, incisive account of her intimate encounter with pornography as a black woman. About six years ago I began seriously consuming hardcore pornography featuring black women as part of what was then my doctoral research. In her essay, Walker recounts experimenting with pornography in a passionate sexual relationship with a male partner who invites Walker to view his pornography collection. Brought into the relationship to enliven the sex, pornography instead quells Walker's libido, arresting her "flow" of sexual energy, and causes him to "feel himself sliding down the wall that is her body, and [be] expelled from inside her."² Walker writes about becoming deeply disturbed in particular by two pornography scenes she shares with this lover—first, a beautiful black woman who resembles her close friend Fannie in a threesome with two unprepossessing white men, and second, a "DP" scene in which a white woman is fucked by two black men who resemble Walker's own brothers, Bobo and Charlie.³ These scenes color her view of pornography, leaving her such that "[s]he can-

not help herself from thinking: Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy: Depressing. This does not excite or stimulate.”

Experiencing many such similar moments in my personal life, these experiences have intensified and become more complex since I started consuming pornography independently and under a different title: scholar. My being hurt and/or confused by discovering porn in a partner's drawer (one of the first of many secret stashes I would discover throughout the years), tentative about how to “successfully” incorporate pornography into sexual relationships in ways that may be mutually pleasurable and not hurtful to both partners, and doubtful if such a feat even remains possible, foreshadowed issues I would encounter years later in my research. I have become increasingly disrupted by not only, as Walker illustrates in her essay, seeing people you know in porn and seeing porn in the people you know, but also seeing pornography in yourself, and seeing yourself in pornography. Particularly as my work focuses on representations of black women in pornography, it has been impossible not to insert myself into many of the scenes I've watched. I did not anticipate these personal effects that researching pornography would engender. Sexual intimacy, as Walker limns, often runs the risk of intensifying such effects.

Partners speaking in what I might call “the language of pornography,” may not be a new thing, but such utterances have become increasingly discordant, as I am more fluent in this expression now because of my research. This language, a visual and physical lexicon, includes stock statements and actions commonly present in most mainstream American pornography—highly scripted and deliberate “dirty” talk; the patting, slapping, or spitting on one's vagina during oral sex; the gratuitous tapping of a penis against one's hips, buttocks, face, or chest; crazy positions that require ample physical dexterity and produce a high visual impact yet yield a low return on pleasure; requests to leave shoes and undergarments on; hair tugging; and of course, money shots and an overzealousness to watch ejaculation on one's face or breasts (more likely referred to as “tits”) specifically. While these acts may not be in fact imitations of pornography, my sensitivity to them as mimics of a uniquely thespian nature, is certainly due to my own consumption of porn. So regardless of whether or not pornography is invited, it maintains no latent presence in my intimate relationships.

I not only remain confused about my personal (and professional) feelings for pornography, but also struggle with how to place it, both metaphorically and physically. The quandary of porn's grander socio-cultural positionality has become reflected on a small scale in both my

living and workspaces. From the time an object arrives in my mailbox, whether it be a magazine tightly sheathed in black plastic meant to conceal its pornographic nature while simultaneously screaming “porn!” to the postperson and to my neighbors, or a suspiciously unmarked cardboard box of DVDs—it reflects an ambivalent suppression of pornography that conflicts with my efforts as a researcher to expose it as a critical medium in the production of racialized sexualities. In many ways my apartment has become an unlikely microcosm, comically reflecting the antipodal positioning of pornography in mainstream American culture—what Linda Williams calls “on/scenity,” a term that begins to communicate the paradox of pornography, a condition that describes pornography’s liminal yet central placement within American culture, its unstable residence somewhere between the real, symbolic, and imaginary, mainstream and margins, legal and illegal, good and bad, and urgently desired yet highly shunned.⁴ The often frantic search to clean up my apartment before a new guest visits now includes, in addition to depositing clothes in closets, and dishes in the dishwasher, stashing my pornography collection. I hide my porn magazines behind their orthodox brethren—cooking magazines. Turning their spines inward, I tuck hardcore DVDs under their lesser-utilized shelf mates—fitness DVDs. Not bothering to conceal my “academic” library of pornography scholarship residing on my bookshelves, I have been questioned many times by my more discerning houseguests who have taken time to peruse the collection of books on my shelves. In my office, where I refrain from watching any hardcore moving image porn or looking at more graphic print materials, similar acts of dissimulation occur. Struggles with how to place pornography in the personal space of my home and in the professional space of my office speak to the broader, yet equally nebulous question of pornography’s place in modern society.

My equivocation toward pornography continues to be fueled by the once humorous now vexing questions (posed mostly but not exclusively by men) about my work such as, “Do you need a research assistant?” “I am so fascinated by your topic; can we talk more about it—perhaps over lunch, dinner, or a drink?” and, the sometimes more benign but often equally loaded question, “How did you get into *this*?” These questions often mask a variety of less appropriate questions like, “Are you *down*?” “What is wrong with you—what kind of kinky pervert are you?” “Why would a junior scholar such as yourself squander her academic career studying this nonsense?” and “Why would you, especially as a black woman, ‘go there’?” This latter question, almost effecting a warning by some, gestures the politics of respectability that still regulate black

women's expressions and practices of sexuality, and to their careful negotiation of their already contested space within the academy.

My answers to these questions are inchoate. On occasion I have, rather cheekily, referred such inquisitors to Peter Lehman's comprehensive article on why one studies and teaches pornography.⁵ Other times, my response, still not the retort I might like it to be, typically reverts to a most desiccated stock answer about pornography, as a multibillion dollar industry in the US alone, being a vastly under-studied medium, particularly in regard to its representation and construction of black female sexuality. To this answer I often receive a follow up question: "Aren't all women similarly treated and objectified in pornography—i.e. how are black women represented differently from white, Asian, Latina, or any other group of women?" Here my reply, certainly more the reprisal I intend it to be, typically takes the form of a series of questions which I envision as a round of ammunition: "Do all women experience being a woman the same way, do all women have similar histories, and do all groups of women share the same legacies of sexual violence? To contend that all women are similarly represented in pornography is to disavow race as a critical category of human difference and power. It is an assertion that denies intersectionality as a vital feminist and antiracist mode of critique that aims to more complexly theorize and deconstruct the nexus of race, gender, sexuality, class, and oppression, to better understand the mutivalence of diverse women's experiences, and ultimately to more effectively enact modes of resistance to hierarchy and hegemony."⁶

Consequently, as a black feminist woman scholar researching images of black women in hardcore contemporary American pornography, I have struggled with a deep ambivalence toward my own consumption of pornography.⁷ When I first began this project, I was convinced that pornography was not antiwomanist, Alice Walker's inclusive poetic term encompassing a black feminist and woman of color feminist perspective. That is, pornography was not, in my mind in opposition to black women's self-empowerment, expression of sexuality, and access to pleasure and erotic power. Though Audre Lorde, in her groundbreaking conceptualization of the erotic as a "life force of women," considers pornography as antithetical to the erotic, I believed pornography could function as a tool, albeit problematic, through which one may unleash her erotic feelings, accessing not merely sexual power and pleasure, but an awareness of the flesh, both carnal and spiritual.⁸ To censor pornography would be to regulate women's erotic autonomy and sexual agency, which as M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us, are critical elements in not just the struggle of decolonization, but the fight against recolonization

as “the attempts by the state, and the global economic interests it represents, to achieve a psychic, sexual, and material usurpation of [the] self-determination . . .”⁹ Identifying myself as “sex-positive, sexually liberal, or a pro-porn feminist,” I believed that, in addition to being a central and oft-overlooked site within academia for considering black female sexuality, pornography was *good*.¹⁰ Pornography is an important instance of speech and a creative cultural production that offers vastly productive possibilities of and for sexual expression. Porn allows for a safe space in which to access pleasure and to enact fantasies. By “safe” I mean that through pornography, one can enact her own sexual fantasies without many of the real consequences that are associated with physical sexual partnerships—sexually transmitted infections, a myriad of obligations, emotional attachment, and so on.

For some black women in particular, I hoped pornography might even offer a solution for those trapped in what Darlene Clark Hine terms the *culture of dissemblance*, the politics of silence shrouding expressions of black female sexuality. Hine posits that a culture of dissemblance has been practiced by black women in response to the historical reality of sexual oppression, sexual violence, and the threat of both. So as a result of a history of violence rooted in antebellum sexual politics and practice, African American women have “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”¹¹ Pornography, I thought, might be an unlikely tool in overcoming the “evasiveness and displacement” that many black women arm themselves with as a protection against sexual violation.¹²

This understanding of the productive potential of pornography for black women has distanced me from a number of seminal black feminist scholars whose work I deeply respect, in addition to Walker. Indeed, black feminism has historically produced a particular set of constraints for black women pornography spectators. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, in her exploration of the sexual politics of black womanhood, argues that black women are a “key pillar on which contemporary pornography rests,” as a medium that treats black women as sex objects, relies on violence as an implicit or explicit theme, and champions themes of female passivity.¹³ Jewel D. Amoah’s “Back on the Auction Block: A Discussion of Black Women in Pornography,” argues that pornography is particularly detrimental for black women in its double jeopardy effect of combining racism and sexism. According to both Collins and Amoah, black women are especially vulnerable to the harms of pornography because they must contend with both its sexual and its racial politics—sexism and racism.¹⁴ Tracey A. Gardner’s “Racism in Pornography and the Women’s Move-

ment,” reaffirms the sociohistorical salience of racism to contemporary American pornography. First presented at a Feminist Perspectives on Pornography Conference in 1978, Gardner’s attack against pornography is deeply personal: “I want you to understand that when a person of color is used in pornography it’s not the physical appearance of that person which makes it racist. Rather it’s how pornography capitalizes on the underlying history and myths surrounding and oppressing people of color in this country.”¹⁵ Similarly, Luisah Teish posits the unique harm that pornography wreaks on black women because of their historical legacies of violence (sexual violence in particular), stating, “the pornography industry’s exploitation of the black woman’s body is qualitatively different from that of the white woman.”¹⁶ Though these scholars have done important work to bring pornography into the discourse of black feminism and consider its unique sociohistorical, cultural, and political relationship to black women, the substratum of racism, sexism, exploitation, and victimization that buttresses this body of work prevents a more nuanced, radical analysis of the polyvalence of pornography. It also prevents a vital narration of the complexities of black female sexuality and its productive opportunities for black female sexual pleasure and power.

More recently however, there are spaces where productive work, both creative and scholarly, is occurring, recognizing, and exploring pornography’s black feminist potential. Black woman independent filmmaker, writer, and artist Abiola Abrams has collaborated with porn pioneer Candida Royalle to create *Femme Chocolat*, an erotic video that combats hegemonic narratives of black women’s sexual assault, exploitation, and exoticization. Featuring a diverse cast of black female performers, this line seeks to destabilize hierarchies of beauty and body and to empower women of color, a largely un-mined market in the industry.¹⁷ Also in the arena of pornography production, author, sex-educator, and feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino recognizes not only the empowering feminist potential of pornography, but also reveals the diverse and often problematic sources of women’s sexual pleasure. For example, in a highly acclaimed video series called *Rough Sex*, Taormino dynamically explores edge play, bringing to life performers’ actual fantasies of sexual aggression in ways that illuminate the charged complexities of violence, pain, complicity, and sexual pleasure for black women.

Similarly, black lesbian filmmaker Shine Louise Houston has transformed the field of queer pornography production. Challenging mainstream tropes of “normative” black female sexuality in porn, she states, “[t]here is power in creating images, and for a woman of color and a queer to take that power . . . I don’t find it exploitative; I think it’s nec-

essary.”¹⁸ Houston produces “hardcore indie feminist dyke porn” which challenges perceptions “that porn is exploitation of women and that sex in porn is violence against women.”¹⁹ Exhibiting beautiful cinematography, fresh narratives, and incredibly diverse performers, Houston’s work critically queers representations of black female sexual desire, offering modes of pleasure outside of hegemonic, heteronormative representations of black womanhood in porn. While there is evidence of a black feminist pornographic gaze in porn production, locating this lens in academic scholarship proves more difficult. Mireille Miller-Young, however, considers how black women performers and producers autonomously negotiate the landscape of pornography, analyzing porn as a critical arena for black women’s labor, pleasure, and self-representation. Illuminating the intricacies of black female sexual politics, Miller-Young’s invaluable historical and ethnographic research reveals how black women, as sexual subjects, engage in “illicit erotic economies” in ways that demonstrate their professional autonomy, financial independence, and self-determination.²⁰ This body of work, both creative and scholarly, has been paramount in expanding the black feminist pornographic gaze from its androcentric, antiporn, and heteronormative roots. Asking difficult questions about the entanglement between sexual pleasure and violence, labor and agency, self-authorship and self-representation, desire and ethicality, these women are undertaking important work in correcting the myopia of the black feminist pornographic gaze to strengthen our understanding of the imbrication of power and pleasure for black women.

Yet just as Alice Walker struggled with her attempt to use porn as a vehicle of sexual pleasure and expression, so too have I grappled with my premise of the virtues of pornography and the regenerative possibilities it may offer for black women in particular. My perspective toward pornography has shifted. The daily deluge of highly repetitive images of often anonymous black women (*phat booty hoes*, *brown bottom girls*, *horny ebony sluts*, and *chocolate cream pies*) fragmented, dismembered, and objectified, pouring out of the drawers of my file cabinets, bookmarked at the top of my home and office computer screens, and now flashing spectacles on the backs of my closed eyelids, has altered my initial optimism toward pornography. So years later I am indubitably convinced of my first hypothesis—the fact that pornography is an invaluable medium in analyzing black female sexuality. However, the latter has become less certain. That is, I have become less assured of the intrinsic virtues of mainstream pornography—its expression of alternative sexualities, its possibilities of and for sexual pleasure outside of a white heteropatriar-

chal imagination or fantasy, and its capability for an admittedly utopian construction that I might call “sustainable arousal,” arousal that is not an ephemeral feeling but rather one that endures. The sexual pleasure engendered by much mainstream pornography has increasingly been this nonsustainable kind—very much a body reflexive response that is quickly quelled by the mind’s rejection of the image as Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy: Depressing.

As such, pornography’s function as a “body genre” has a new, more profound meaning to me. Linda Williams identifies pornography as one of three types of body genres: genres of film that produce a physical response in viewers that tends to mimic that which the characters on screen are experiencing.²¹ Pornography’s conceptualization as a body genre is due to its ability to elicit a visceral response from its viewers. It has the power to physically manipulate the bodies of its viewers—whether through an increase in body temperature, a quickening of the heartbeat, or most commonly a rush of blood to the genital region and a feeling of sexual arousal. Indeed what I have found to be so compelling throughout my research is how this power of porn as body genre feels so at odds with the power of pornography to arouse the mind. That is, frequently racist, sexist, and purely offensive material can and will arouse the body while simultaneously seeming to quash the mind. I’ve consumed countless what I would consider alarming hardcore pornographic images of the black female body. Yet despite my objection to the ways she may be treated by her partner, positioned, framed, spoken to, clothed, and/or to her expression (or lack thereof) of her own sexual pleasure, there is the potential, albeit short lived, for physical arousal. So there is a way that pornography, I believe, often does not allow for a separation of the mind from the body, but rather engenders a relationship that makes my critical mind, as an academic, a stranger to my body, and vice versa. My scholarly trained black feminist mind often futilely scolds my body for responding in such a manner.

Indeed, this ability of pornography—its power to manipulate the mind and body of its viewers in different and conflicting ways—is just another facet of pornography’s profound ambivalence. This equivocality is vividly revealed in its unstable and oscillating representation of the black female body—between fantasy and reality, lust and disgust. So it is more than that “this manipulation of feeling [that] lies at the heart of porn film’s volatility as a genre,” but that this vicissitude of apprehension and emotion is the foundation of porn’s power as a visual medium—not just its ability to make the mind and body move in different and conflicting ways, but its intense ambivalence, multivalence, and its power to

mean so many different things to so many different people in so many different contexts, in so little time.²² So while my contextual affinity for pornography may have decreased significantly, my faith that it is a powerful and important medium has not.

To reconcile this quandary, to “help [my]self from thinking: Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy: Depressing,” I have continuously relied upon black feminist scholar Michele Wallace’s conceptualization of negative/positive images as a mantra that underlines my research. Wallace problematizes the negative/positive binary as a prevailing mode of American visual criticism. Much of the literature and dialogue on visual representations of blackness are centered on the positive/negative schema. That is, certain images that depict black people in a presumably honorific way are “good” while others that portray them in a less than favorable nature are deemed “bad.” Wallace rightly criticizes this binary approach, saying that it sets the mission of cultural production as a corrective one as well as places the salience of representation too much on the side of reception instead of production.²³ Yet relying on the negative/positive schema also stifles how we look at and critique images of blackness and asphyxiates our critical visual lexicon. Employing a negative/positive framework as a type of representational methodology stifles the language of cultural representational criticism.

Wallace’s vital theory serves as a constant and much-needed reminder to not tumble into the Manichean divide that still marks much of the scholarship on pornography. As such it continues to help me to reconcile my feelings and thoughts, as a black feminist woman and scholar (two entangled identities whose distinction, perhaps never really existent, seems to become less extant the further I progress on this academic trajectory) studying pornography. Pornography makes me feel different ways different days. Similarly, my feelings for it oscillate in different contexts. I acquiesce that it is acceptable for me to enjoy pornography (not one monolithic thing) and to question it simultaneously. It is this motion, propelled by my intimacy with pornography, that I find so exciting, promising, and challenging about the medium. Ultimately it is my hope that maintaining such a relationship with pornography allows me to produce better scholarship.

Instead of being netted by a kind of politics of respectability in regard to pornography, I argue that we take up a politics of perversion, a disruptive shift in black feminist studies, to critically analyze the entanglements of pleasure and power through pornography consumption, performance, and production. My conjuring of a politics of perversion relies on the plural and polymorphous resonance of the term perversion.²⁴ A

corruption itself, the politics of perversion recognizes the subvertive, transformative power of perversion as the alteration of something from its original course, and the kink—the sexual deviance—that perversion evokes.²⁵ Such a politics of perversion might be understood as a kind of queering that enables us to see “sexual pleasure as a feminist choice” and the complex and contradictory ways that pornography continues to inform the pivotal nexus of black women’s power and pleasure.²⁶

The separation of pornography and black feminism is an ideological wedge that distances elements that profoundly inform one another, ultimately preventing a kind of radical analysis of black female sexuality. Pornography and black feminism maintain a critical, if volatile, relationship with one another. Rather than viewing this relationship as inherently incompatible, we need to understand porn and black feminism as pushing, not policing, each other in productive directions that elucidate black female sexuality as “simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency.”²⁷ Among many things, pornography forces black feminism to reckon with artifacts like the politics of respectability, the legacies of black female sexual violence, and our personal and institutional investments in heterosexualization. Black feminism similarly propels pornography, making it more accountable to black women’s diverse sociohistorical cultural and political experiences, informative standpoints, activism, agency, labor, and representation. The alliance of porn and black feminism encourages us to be more aware of both our sexual desires and our boundaries. Lastly, this relationship causes us to confront the vast heterogeneities of both pornography and black American feminism(s), because just as there is not one black feminism, there is certainly not one pornography. As such, the chasmic tension between pornography and black feminism becomes itself a productive space to consider the complexity and diverseness of black women’s sexual practice and the mutability of black female sexuality.

Notes

1. Alice Walker, “Porn,” in *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1971), 83.

2. Ibid, 80; 84. In “Coming Apart,” another trenchant piece on pornography, Walker further limns the deleterious power of the deeply racialized pornographic fantasy and porn’s menacing penetration of black women’s intimate lives. See Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt, 1979), 41–53.

3. DP is a commonly used abbreviation within the adult entertainment industry

for double penetration, a sexual act describing one woman being penetrated in the anus by one penis and in the vagina by another simultaneously. An extremely risky and often painful act, DP typically garners more money for female performers.

4. Linda Williams develops the term *on/scenity* to describe “the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, pleasures, that have been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene.” The term “on/scenity” echoes the writings of Laura Kipnis who states that pornography “is simultaneously entirely central and entirely marginal.” See Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3, and Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 181.

5. Lehman’s introduction offers a wonderful exegesis to the question of why one would teach and study pornography. Offering a number of reasons to support academic pornography scholarship (both research and pedagogy), Lehman cites pornography’s insight on human sexuality, economic impact, massive and global consumer base, and important relationship to new technologies. For more see Peter Lehman, “‘A Dirty Little Secret’ Why Teach and Study Pornography?” in *Pornography: Film and Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006). Linda Williams also offers an account of her pedagogical experiences with teaching pornography to undergraduates within the academy. Explaining her motivations for teaching pornography, Williams cites a defense of pornography not to combat the voices of virulent antiporn feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, but rather “to promote a more substantive, critical, and textually aware critique of the most popular moving-image genre on earth.” See Linda Williams, “Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12.

6. Here I am drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational article on intersectionality, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.

7. Identifying as a black feminist for me means maintaining an interest in and a commitment to knowledge production (scholarly, artistically, and culturally) both by and about the heterogeneous experience of black women as well as believing in the empowerment such knowledge production engenders and the oppression it works to disintegrate.

8. Audre Lorde offers one of the most untraditional, powerful, and still radical, conceptualizations of the erotic. Lorde’s erotic is not necessarily sexual; it is a source of power and knowledge women need to reclaim their “deeply female and spiritual plane.” As a “life force of women” this erotic is present in all aspects of women’s daily existence and our interactions with others, not merely sexual exchanges and physical relationships. Yet, while Lorde’s reclaiming and reconceptualization of the erotic may offer a vehicle away from sexual repression for some women and a possibility for finding and sharing joy, I ultimately find problematic a number of issues in her view of the erotic. First, it disavows the possibility for a male erotic or a male access to and of the erotic. The homogenous, essentialized male is vilified as the cause of women’s (also a falsely homogenous group) repression of the erotic in a way that teleologically fixes a kind of institutional patriarchal sexual hegemony and heteronormative policing of women’s erotic power. Second, in its situating of pornography and the erotic as two “diametrically opposed uses of the sexual,” it unjustly demonizes pornography. Pornographic pleasure becomes reduced to a type of suppression and lack of sensation. For more see Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,”

in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59. Also reprinted in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 569–74.

9. M. Jacqui Alexander, “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 63–100.

10. Here, the term sexual liberals is borrowed from Ann Russo who uses the term to “refer to feminist and progressive writers, scholars and activists who criticize the feminist anti-pornography movement on the grounds of potential infringement on individual rights to sexual identity, sexual expression, individual interpretation, freedom of speech and privacy.” See Ann Russo, “Feminists Confront Pornography’s Subordinating Practices,” in *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality*, eds. Gail Dines, Robert Jensen and Ann Russo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

11. Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer, 1989): 912.

12. Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 109.

13. Patricia Hill Collins, *Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1990), 168.

14. According to Collins, pornography is “ground[ed] in racism and sexism.” For more see Collins, 167. Amoah contends that porn “wreaks particular havoc on black women whose representations in pornography are predicated on not just gender exploitation but “negative racial stereotypes and racialized myths.” For more see Jewel D. Amoah, “Back on the Auction Block: A Discussion of Black Women and Pornography,” *National Black Law Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 205.

15. Tracey A. Gardner, “Racism and the Women’s Movement,” in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William and Morrow, 1980), 105.

16. Because “[t]he history of America is largely one of systematic physical and symbolic exploitation of the Black women’s body,” Teish argues that black women uniquely face the vestiges of such a history in porn. See Luisah Teish, “A Quite Subversion,” in *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William and Morrow, 1980), 155; 117.

17. Under the pseudonym of Venus Hottentot, Abiola Abrams directed *AfroDite Superstar* (2007), the first film under the *Femme Chocolat* line, executively produced by Candida Royalle. According to Abrams, *AfroDite Superstar* “is about empowering women culturally, politically, emotionally and sexually.” See Jamye Waxman, “Behind the Scenes with *AfroDite Superstar*: An Interview with the Film’s Director, Abiola Abrams,” *Babeland*, accessed October 4, 2010, <http://www.babeland.com/sex-info/features/afrodite-superstar-interview>.

18. Shine Louise Houston is founder of porn production company Pink and White Productions. For more visit her website at <http://pinkwhite.biz/>.

19. For more see Malindo Lo, “Shine Louise Houston Will Turn You On,” *Curve* 16 no. 1, accessed October 6, 2011, <http://backup.curvemag.com/Detailed/711.html>.

20. See Mireille Miller-Young, “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography,” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 261–92, and “Sexy and Smart: Black Women and the Politics of Self-Authorship in Netporn,” in *C’lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader*, eds. Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen and Matteo Pasquini, http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/24.pdf.

21. Williams explores horror films, melodramas, and pornography as three types of *body genres*, films that have a visceral link to the viewer's body and produce actual physical responses within it. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

22. Catherine Zuromskis, "Prurient Pictures in Popular Film: The Crisis of Pornographic Representations," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 59 (Spring 2007): 4.

23. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990).

24. Freud's understanding of polymorphous perversity is useful here as a kind of degenitalization and elaboration of erotic pleasure.

25. In theorizing the politics of perversion I am relying on the multivalence of the word pervert itself, defined as (verb) "to alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended; lead (someone) away from what is considered right, natural, or acceptable;" and (noun) "a person whose sexual behavior is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable." See The New Oxford American Dictionary, 3rd Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed October 15, 2010, <http://www.oxfordreference.com>.

26. In "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice," African feminist activist and scholar Patricia McFadden argues for the need to reassert a kind of feminist agency in which "we can embrace women's erotic power as a political resource in transforming our various social spaces as well as ourselves." For McFadden such a shift is vital in recognizing "sexuality as something beyond conventional reactionary narratives of efficient reproduction, safe motherhood and defences against disease and violation." For more see Patricia McFadden, "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice," in *Feminist Africa* 2 (2003), accessed September 27, 2010, <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/sexual-pleasure-as-feminist-choice>.

27. Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kagen Paul, 1984), 1.

Porn: An Effective Vehicle for Sexual Role Modeling and Education



NINA HARTLEY

Nina Hartley's rock-solid understanding of the importance of sexual autonomy has fueled her twenty-eight-year career in adult entertainment. As a performer, director, writer, educator, public speaker, and feminist thinker, Hartley has traveled the world delivering her message that sexual freedom is a fundamental human right. She welcomes new social media opportunities for sharing her knowledge and empowering all people, regardless of their orientation. She is the author of *Nina Hartley's Guide to Total Sex*. Putting to use her degree in nursing, she and her husband, I.S. Levine, have produced the sex-ed video series collectively known as The Nina Hartley Guides, from Adam and Eve, which has sold millions of copies and is currently in its thirty-eighth edition. Still active in front of the camera, she and her husband live in Los Angeles.

When my father discovered what I do for a living he asked, "Why sex? Why not the violin?" I didn't have an answer for him at that moment. I know now that I'm sexual the way that Mozart was musical. I'm just wired this way and a life of public sexuality has, from my very first time on stage, been as natural to me as breathing. This is true even now, nearly three decades into my career.

When I started in adult entertainment as a dancer in 1983, I didn't think of myself as any kind of pioneer. I was simply doing what my 1970s San Francisco Bay Area feminist training had told me was my right and duty as a liberated woman: to develop my sexuality as I saw fit. "My body, my rules," was the credo of the time and, for a nonmonogamous, bisexual exhibitionist with her own ideas about sex, adult entertainment was the only game in town. My goal was never to be a trailblazer, but to carry out my true life's work: to speak about sex, sexuality, and sexual expression from a place of practice and not just theory, so that I might be helpful to others. A byproduct of that pursuit was my ability to make

a living, which gave me the financial security to be able to devote my life to this work.

By the time I did my first strip tease, I was fully aware of the accomplishments of the women who had come before me, most notably Betty Dodson (all hail), Xaviera Hollander, and the women of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Their books—*Liberating Masturbation*, *The Happy Hooker*, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*—laid the groundwork for a world in which a woman with an unconventional sexual identity could be happy, whole, and proud, without apology. In time, I connected with the emerging sex-positive community in San Francisco. I became friends with other erotic explorers, including Annie Sprinkle, Carol Queen, Susie Bright, Patrick Califia, Gayle Rubin, Kat Sunlove, Bobby Lilly, and Joanie Blank, whose writings about sexuality and sexual politics (I longed to be a writer but didn't have the discipline) waged the same battles I did, only on different terrain.

My initial foray into porn came at a particularly opportune time in history, coinciding with a broader public debate over obscenity and a growing awareness of HIV/AIDS, just then being recognized as something other than the "gay plague." During the early- and mid-1980s (at precisely the time when the home video market took off), differing battle lines around the issue of pornography emerged. One line was drawn within the women's movement, resulting in a split between the pro- and anticensorship camps, which remains today (the so-called "feminist porn wars"). The other line was drawn by the federal government, then under President Ronald Reagan. Wishing to appease his socially conservative base, he sought to discredit the findings of President Richard Nixon's 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, which had found no social harm from explicit material, and which Nixon had immediately repudiated. Reagan convened the Meese Commission on Pornography, which produced the Meese Report: over 1,900 pages of antiporn propaganda that flew off the shelves, making the United States government a best-selling pornographer in its own right. The commission was so obviously partisan that two of its members ultimately resigned rather than sign their names to its findings (though they were antiporn when they joined the commission).

So why was there suddenly so much conflict over the sexual representation of women in the public sphere? In my view, it was a function of demographics. Women who had graduated from high school in the late 1970s—when feminist thought was influencing ideas on sexuality—were now in their midtwenties, a natural time for sexual exploration, experi-

mentation, and inquiry. Feminism introduced us to such concepts as “our bodies, our rules,” while prominent feminist author Robin Morgan proclaimed, “Porn is the theory, rape is the practice.” We were encouraged to take responsibility for our own orgasms while being told that penetration was the patriarchal practice of colonizing women’s bodies, and any woman who wanted that was not liberated. These opposing messages left all women doubting their sanity. If women wanted to practice role-play or power exchange, penetrate their partners or be penetrated by them, or consume pornography in their private lives, their feminist credentials were called into question. In defining the personal as political, this stripe of feminism also defined the political as personal. We were told, in the words of eighteenth-century Quakers, to “speak truth to power,” but, when we did so in our own individual voices, we stood accused of betraying our gender as a whole. This battle is far from over, and it’s not a good sign that antisex conservatives from the right now use feminist/progressive slogans to push their antiwoman, antichoice agenda.

At the most visceral level, I got into porn because that’s where the naked women were. I came here for the sex. I wanted casual, no-feelings-hurt, no-U-Haul sexual contact with women without the attendant complexities. I wasn’t looking for lesbian romance, or romance of any other kind. Porn offers all the fun of dating with none of the hassle. I know some people find this attitude disquieting at best, disgusting and immoral at worst, but it very much suited my temperament. I also wanted easy sexual contact with men, but had no time or patience for the mating dances of the club or bar scenes, places where people have to pretend that sexual contact could, should, or would evolve into romantic relationships. I have never liked being with people who are drunk or high or otherwise partying simply because they can’t admit to themselves that they just want to get laid. In porn, I discovered, I’m not subjected to a partner’s projections of guilt and shame over their own desires that leads them to call me whore and slut, while assuming no responsibility for their own behavior and motivations. My desires and proclivities dovetailed nicely with the job requirements for a porn performer, to my benefit and, admittedly, to that of those who hired me.

But beyond providing a perfect playground for my hedonistic indulgences, I saw and continue to see porn as a means by which to share my deeply held ideas and opinions about sex, pleasure, love, and intimacy with other like-minded folks. I’m scientifically minded, and porn gave me a laboratory where I could conduct my experiments, a diverse pool of enthusiastic subjects, a reliable subsidy for my research, and feedback

from the end users as to its efficacy. I already had a degree in nursing from San Francisco State University. Our culture sees much of sexuality as deviant and sick, and sick people need a nurse's care. Most people I've met in the course of my career are in some way wounded around their sexuality. They need to talk to someone who can give them perspective about their situation. In taking on that position, I would become a role model of healthful behavior, advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves, and educate people about sexual health and literacy. While people may be advised to talk to their healthcare providers about health-related sexual issues, many of those professionals are, themselves, deeply conflicted about sexuality and pornography (as is the greater culture), which makes going to them with one's sexual problems highly fraught. I can't sleep with all of my fans personally (though I'd dearly like to), so I hope that my sex-education videos can inspire them and give them the necessary tools for sexual fulfillment.

I admit that I also love performing. I can't sing, dance, act, or play an instrument well enough to make a living at it (at least partially answering my father's question about the violin), but as a porn performer I can express myself as both artist and scientist. Sex is my subject in both realms. The choice to pursue my work in this manner does not come without cost. Once you start showing your naughty bits on film, what you create is by definition "pornography," with the stigma, limitations, and freedom that come with doing so. If I had no other mission than to make myself happy by engaging in sex as performance, the fact that doing so makes it nearly impossible to be taken seriously in any other context wouldn't be particularly bothersome. My work, after all, is the ultimate full-contact improvisation exercise. We arrive on the set, where, as characters, we create a sexually themed story, or parable if you will, enact it, and then we go home. Some days are longer than others, but the work itself never gets old because the varieties of sexual desire and expression are infinite and never take the same form twice.

However, having always brought my broader philosophical mission to a medium relentlessly focused on commercial entertainment, I've had to subvert that medium to my own ends more often than not, and I would be the first to admit that I have not always succeeded. At best, I like to think I've avoided allowing the industry to use me to its ends to the detriment of mine.

Porn inevitably delivers an education, and acts to some degree as a role-modeling force (though I think the latter secondary effect is greatly over-dramatized by those who see porn as a danger to society) but many

of the messages it delivers are shallow, dishonest, and reflective of our culture's shame and confusion about sexuality, as opposed to celebrating that sexuality in its power and diversity. Except for that very specific genre of porn specifically intended for educational purposes, it's a less-than-ideal classroom at best and I've had to work uphill against its false assumptions throughout most of my career.

While I'm not particularly spiritual, I identify strongly with the Jungian archetype of the sacred prostitute and her vital role in sexual healing. I fantasized about inhabiting that role more literally when I was younger but did not dare work as an actual prostitute. Laws against sexual commerce only hurt women and all consensual sex work should be decriminalized *now*, but until it is, confining my incarnation of that archetype to the safe environs of a legal porn shoot has been the only way I felt comfortable performing that healing function, even if only in the abstract. In this way I "touch" more people at one time through the entertainment products in which I participate, but cannot touch them literally. Actress Cornelia Otis Skinner said, "Woman's virtue is man's greatest invention." That phrase is both true and telling: everyday men and women both carry the heavy load and pay the cost for this retrograde notion of virtue. Female sexual agency remains a contentious subject that sparks fierce debate and displays of moral outrage, bigotry, and murderous violence. Our culture continues to punish women for their sexuality, from woman-on-woman slut shaming, to continuing attempts by local, state, and federal government agencies to limit access to effective family planning. Our country's "honor killings"—ranging from the murder of abortion providers to the killing of a partner in a fit of jealous "If-I-can't-have-you-then-*nobody*-can-have-you!" rage—are almost always connected to women's sexual autonomy and/or health.

In a culture that still makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to speak freely about sexual issues, it's hardly surprising that women and men are reduced to searching a medium meant for pure entertainment for nuggets of truth, and the results are mixed at best.

Before I produced my first deliberately educational movie, *Nina Hartley's Guide to Oral Sex*, I understood that all performances could be instructional, hitting both intellectual and emotional targets. Porn, however contrived or silly it may be, is the only place in our culture for people to actually witness sex, and viewers watch closely to see what's going on. I've always role-modeled effective sexual techniques useful to the pleasure of both men and women, hoping people pay close attention and might try them out with their lovers or spouses. To those who ask

how I can still enjoy what I do after so many years, the answer is simple. I've held firm to a core principle: if I don't do it at home for free, I won't do it on camera for money. Fans notice my enthusiasm and I repeatedly hear, "You really seem to enjoy what you're doing," said with wonder and gratitude. I do not do that which I do not enjoy. I do not believe that just because something appears in a pornographic picture it will be welcomed by either men or women as actual practice in their own bedrooms, nor should it be. But I do believe some porn, particularly porn that is most focused on mutual pleasure in whatever form—including those that challenge conventional notions of pleasure, like consensual BDSM—can be of instructional value.

Despite the rancor directed at men and their sexuality throughout the 1970s and continuing into today, I've found that by and large men are eager students. They want very much to be good lovers and for their partners to enjoy themselves in bed. As a dancer with full freedom of expression while on stage, I found that all it took was a naked woman speaking her truth about sex, without shaming or blaming, and they were all ears. I lost a lot of my fear of men in that first strip club where I danced when I saw how they, too, were victims of antisex conditioning. It was just different from the antisex conditioning that women have traditionally received. Men and women are both wounded by our cultural constraints on sexuality, and have been falsely set up as adversaries when they're meant to be allies in life and love.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a moving picture is worth ten thousand words. I can either describe how to do a particular technique or demonstrate just how I twist my wrists or use my hands and the viewer can grasp it immediately. Sex is largely a physical skill set like any sport or marital art, and can be taught. How to *apply* that skill set, with whom, where, and when is left to the individuals. In that respect, some of the lessons of even the most frivolous or vulgar pornography are still more enlightened than those taught by mainstream entertainment.

Unlike Hollywood tropes, in which the "transgressive" woman must meet a horrible fate for crossing some invisible line, at the end of a porn movie the woman has had orgasms and lives to tell the tale. There are no Anna Kareninas or Emma Bovarys in porn.

Porn shows a wide variety of sexual behavior among all sorts of people with no one dying at the end: group sex, sex with toys, sex with people of different races, sex with oneself, sex in public, anal sex, sex with much older or younger partners, sex with people of different genders, and more. In this way, porn is very radical. No matter how outra-

geous and buffoonish, puerile or stupid the portrayal may be, nobody dies, nobody goes to jail, and nobody's hurt. When we keep in mind that porn is essentially live-action cartoons burlesquing social convention, it doesn't matter how realistic the set-ups may be, or how preposterous. Learning can happen with laughter, so if I can make someone laugh while they look at their issues, it helps drive the lesson home.

For all the hostility directed at porn for allegedly putting undue pressure on women to conform to a certain standard of beauty (leaving aside how porn affects men's sexual self-image and confidence), it's much less insidiously intolerant than mainstream media. When we can set aside our own prejudices toward porn's assumed "message" (as if some porn council meets on alternate Tuesdays to plot how to oppress women), we see a wider variety of body types than what is welcome in either Hollywood or at Fashion Week: short, tall, curvy, boxy, skinny, bony, big butted, flat butted, big boobed, small boobed, blonde, brunette, redhead, ages eighteen to eighty, with factory-issue bodies or with cosmetic surgery enhancements, all are welcome who want to participate. Humans have an enduring fascination with nudity in general (and genitalia in particular) and porn certainly lets us have our fill of looking at a wide range of naked bodies, in full color action, without us having to actually try to meet these people ourselves.

Porn houses our sexual dreams, which are vitally important to our happiness. It's important to see on screen things barely imagined, if only to allay our fears that we're somehow disturbed or messed up in the head because I can say confidently that our tastes in porn say little about us as individuals and most of us can tell the difference between fantasy and fact, between the screen and our actual lives and relationships. We might be intrigued by something, or even learn something from a movie, but our essential natures will not be fundamentally affected or changed by exposure to porn. While all media, to say nothing of personal experience, affect our worldview, nothing removes individual responsibility for our behavior, no matter how loudly some proclaim otherwise. Picking up a few tricks from porn isn't going to compromise anyone's ability to have a healthy relationship if that person was capable of having such a relationship in the first place. It's not our job to limit what can be represented. To do so arguably undercuts porn's most critical social use, which is to challenge the notions of what sex can be.

Porn does not generally educate people well when it comes to how to have sex. It depicts cunnilingus poorly because the lens is blocked if the action is done correctly. With rare exceptions, it doesn't spend nearly

enough running time on foreplay and invests too much in the final minutes of hydraulic penetration.

But porn does offer us tantalizing clues about why to have sex, or to have a different kind of sex than we might otherwise have considered. At its best, it expands our definitions of pleasure rather than circumscribing them. That's the work I've been doing for the past quarter century, whether the people I worked for were in on the game or simply thought I was doing a hot scene that would help sell a lot of boxes. I stayed on message no matter what the script, and I think the other performers whom people remember over the years have done the same in their own ways. They took something of their real sexuality and used it to make their scenes uniquely their own. By enabling them to do that, yes, porn has served an educational function even when it was only out to show us a good time. There's nothing wrong with learning how to have a good time.

It would be unfortunate if that slightly too-perfect vision of what sex could be were lost. Piracy and the Internet have severely diminished the profitability of traditional business models, while also creating access for other viewpoints. On the upside, previously marginalized people now have access to the means of production. Rather than being treated as some kind of freak show, pierced, tattooed, disabled, queer, and trans folk can now make movies that speak to their sensibilities and create communities that support and foster them and their sexual visions.

More than ever, small companies are popping up around the country, dedicated to making movies that don't necessarily cater only to the sexual tastes of heterosexual men and that strive to treat the performers well and respectfully. Rather than having to look through dozens of "straight" porn movies hoping to find one scene that sort of works for them, queer folk now have access to entire movies, websites, and magazines containing nothing but what they like to see, just like the straight folk. And for that, credit has to be given to the more conventional porn that came before for opening the way to alternative visions of sexuality. It's been both individually and socially educational in that regard.

People often ask, "Where do you see porn in ten years?" I really don't have a clue, with technology changing so quickly. That said, we've pretty much come to the end of "circus sex," the X-rated equivalent of *Jackass*. There are a finite number of orifices in a human body, and only so many things that can be stuck into them, and those options have been pretty much played out ad nauseum. That leaves the realm of feelings and emotions, which have no limit and no end. So, if I were to predict anything I'd

predict a focus on capturing authentic feeling on camera, be it romantic, animalistic, or something in between.

Of one thing I'm certain. Pornography has always been with us and in whatever form, it always will be. Those who imagine a world without porn as some kind of utopia are actually imagining a world in which there is no room for sexual dreaming, or sexual learning, but rather a prescribed definition of "wholesome" sexuality from which the erotic imagination, woolly as it sometimes is, has been leached. I would not want to live in such a world and I don't think most of us—if being honest with ourselves—would, either.

I picture my work as a sex educator continuing long after my career as a sex performer has become more a hobby than an occupation. I expect to continue delivering the good news I brought with me when I came in. It's a simple enough message, but so important to a happy life: sex is good for you and the more you know about it, the better it's likely to be.

From “It Could Happen to Someone You Love” to “Do You Speak Ass?”: Women and Discourses of Sex Education in Erotic Film and Video



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In June 2012, the Michigan House of Representatives had just passed a bill implementing sweeping new regulations on providers of abortion services and was debating a bill that would, if passed, have banned all abortions in the state after twenty weeks with almost non-existent exemptions for the life of the pregnant woman. During the floor debate, West Bloomfield Democratic Representative Lisa Brown ended her speech against the proposed law with the words, “Finally, Mr. Speaker, I’m flattered that you’re all so interested in my vagina, but ‘no’ means ‘no.’” Responses of histrionic outrage from her male colleagues who had supported the bill were swift and shrill. “What she said was offensive,” said Rep. Mike Callton, a Republican from Nashville. “It was so offensive, I don’t even want to say it in front of women. I would not say that in mixed company.” House Republicans then banned Brown and a Democratic colleague, Representative Barb Byrum from Onandaga, from speaking on the floor the following day during debate on a bill concerning school system retirees. At a press conference held while her colleagues were debating the retiree bill, Brown asked, “If I can’t say the word vagina, why are we legislating vaginas? What language should I use?”¹ Brown’s asser-

tion of ownership by using the first-person possessive and her mocking conflation of the twin male impulses of sexual interest in and patriarchal control of women's reproductive systems was enough to impart a jolt of unspeakable pornographic obscenity to even the most medicalized vocabulary pertaining to female reproductive anatomy.

This male squeamishness was, of course, nothing new. The nineteenth-century professionalization of medicine, particularly the field of gynecology, occurred at the same time that reformers such as Anthony Comstock were passing laws criminalizing unauthorized images and information about sex, pregnancy, and the body, which they saw everywhere after inexpensive, mass-produced books and pamphlets became commonplace. This ambivalence continued for the first three quarters of the twentieth century, as medical and educational discourses were used to both condemn and defend publically exhibited motion pictures, some of which featured images forbidden by the institution of Hollywood, from the "classical" exploitation films of the 1930s and 1940s to the dawn of hardcore cinema at the close of the 1960s.

Recently, the niche marketing of home video has made possible the appearance of sexually explicit educational materials completely created by women and distributed online and on home video by the same commercial industry that produces and distributes pornographic videos and sex toys, all seemingly without religious, medical, or juridical vetting by middle-aged white males. For some, this is yet another onslaught of dirty pictures seeking the legal and cultural cover of educational value and social importance. The series of videos from long-time contraceptive and sex-toy supplier Adam and Eve produced by and starring porn actress Nina Hartley and a later-introduced line of how-to videos produced by author and sex educator Tristan Taormino do in fact share a wide range of aesthetic and discursive features with both exploitation films going back many decades and contemporary commercial porn. However, each of these series dispenses in its own way with the patriarchal voice of medical authority characteristic of earlier modes. In addition, many installments in the Hartley and Taormino series move the emphasis away from the genitals to a more whole-body sexual response; finally, both Hartley and Taormino attempt to portray active sexuality as a lived inner experience, unique to each woman, rather than as a discrete observable moment captured on video for the camera and, later, the detached viewer. The tension between these innovative approaches and the visual and commercial undertow of more conventional porn is a mark of their engagement with and intervention in changing discourses of sexuality.

Censorship and the Gestation of Gynecology

In America, the relationship between images and discourses on the female body circulated for educational and therapeutic purposes and those circulated for the purpose of titillation is as intimate, tortured, and dysfunctional, as is any relationship characterized by common parentage and close family resemblance. This relationship reached an unsustainable level of conflict in the years following the Civil War. While Americans endured the wrenching changes to the economy as its emphasis shifted from agriculture to manufacturing, a decades-long relocation of population centers from rural areas resulted in massive cultural displacement: large numbers of young men moved into densely populated cities and were exposed to mass-produced forms of popular entertainment such as paperback books, mass-circulation magazines, flyers, and pamphlets, all made possible by economies of scale in production and distribution as vulcanized rubber was revolutionizing transportation and streamlining the printing process, not to mention reducing the manufacturing cost of latex condoms. Several cultural and religious groups attempted to circumvent the seismic shifts that these changes threatened to bring, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) which, in 1866, sent a contingent to Albany, New York, to lobby for the suppression of obscene and licentious books and literature. In the years that followed, YMCA crusader and reformer Anthony Comstock would form the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and successfully lobby Congress in 1873 to bring to bear federal powers to oversee the postal service and levy tariffs to bear on literature he saw as corrupting of youth. The so-called "Comstock Law" made it a felony to import or send through the mails any sexual imagery, sexual accounts, or information on birth control and abortion, because of their perceived tendency to incite and corrupt. The law survived an 1896 challenge in the case of *Rosen v. US*, which cited the precedent of English common law upholding the government's ability to censor material that would tend "to deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences."²

One of Comstock's most powerful allies was the American Medical Association, which since its inception in 1847 was stepping up efforts to destroy the centuries-old tradition of midwifery and replace it with the professionalized disciplines of obstetrics and gynecology, both of which actively suppressed access and information about contraception and abortifacents. During this period, anatomy and medical textbooks were seized, restrained, and re-edited to comply with the strictures upheld in the Rosen decision.³ These cultural conflicts and the aforementioned

technological innovations in printing made rapid modernization of the art of medical illustration necessary. A key figure in this modernization was the German artist and illustrator Max Brödel (1870–1941), who emigrated from Leipzig to the US in 1894, where he began working with the first professor of gynecology at the medical school at Johns Hopkins University, Howard Atwood Kelly (1858–1943). In 1898, the first volume of Kelly's textbook, *Operative Gynecology*, was published and featured over one hundred and fifty illustrations by Brödel. This volume and its successor established Kelly as the premiere gynecologist in the United States,⁴ and his work continued to feature the highly detailed and elegant illustrations of Brödel, whose innovations in pen-and-ink technique enabled the volumes' printers to replicate luxurious and meticulously rendered half tones and textures.⁵ Brödel's 1909 illustration of an open-air cystoscopy (an early endoscopic technique for seeing inside the bladder after distending it with air) features a powerful, chiseled profile of Dr. Kelly himself bringing the power of technology and masculine vision to bear on a cutaway side view of a female body.

The light source from the left is both functional, illustrating its role in indirect illumination of the subject through Kelly's physician reflector, and symbolic, adding to the heroic, even hagiographic view of Kelly, which in fact became his role in the history of his profession, as Brödel's would be in medical illustration.⁶ One hundred years later, it is no surprise to either feminists or pornographers that during this earlier time that sought to control women's bodies and men's access to information about and images of them, the first major modern innovations in medical illustration reached critical mass in the field of gynecology.

Sex(ploitation) Ed: White Coats and "False Modesty" on the Movie Screen

Just as the displacements following the Civil War were conflated and confused with the social effects of the rising popular medium of print, the immense social changes in the decades after World War I were attributed by critics and reformers of the time to the increasingly popular medium of motion pictures, and many of these reformers called for strict rules regarding their content. Since widespread municipal and state censorship of motion pictures would have been disastrous for the American film industry's system of carefully scheduled national distribution of their product, throughout Hollywood's studio era from the 1920s until the 1960s, the most powerful players in the American movie business exercised control over the scripts and release prints of any films distrib-

uted by the major studios through the Production Code Administration of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. This self-policing by the PCA was a crucial part of “Hollywood” as a cultural institution based on an ideology of “entertainment” films made with high production values and major stars that became the lingua franca of American popular culture from the 1920s until the rise of television after World War II.

In an artistic and commercial universe parallel to Hollywood’s, a loosely affiliated network of filmmakers, hucksters, regional distributors, and local exhibitors were able to provide audiences with images banned by the studios in the form of low-budget exploitation films on a range of topics forbidden by Hollywood’s Production Code. Film historian Eric Schaefer has traced the relationship between education and titillation in what he calls the classical exploitation film from 1919 to 1959.⁷ Exploitation films were distributed by itinerant showmen to both low-end urban movie houses and small-town theaters, often on a “road show” or “four wall” arrangement with the distributor paying a flat fee to run the box office and control the promotion and exhibition of the threadbare, disunified, and licentiously “educational” film for the length of the engagement.

Where Hollywood policed its own content and unveiled the resulting product to the public as “entertainment,” exploitation filmmakers mobilized clinical and educational discourses to provide legal “cover” for the forbidden images and accounts on display. The “birth-of-a-baby” film *Street Corner* from 1948 tells the story of Lois Marsh, a seventeen-year-old high school junior who loses her virginity after the graduation party for her boyfriend Bob Mason. Lois becomes pregnant, and Bob dies in a car crash rushing back from college to marry her secretly. A waitress at the local diner puts Lois into contact with a female abortionist on “the other side of town,” and Lois almost dies from sepsis and internal bleeding after her surreptitious operation. The wizened and weary local physician, Dr. James Fenton, saves Lois’s life after the botched operation, observes the successful prosecution of the abortionist, and narrates the story in flashback from his office.

Street Corner begins with the exploitation film “square-up,” a credit crawl assuring us that what is to follow is in the interest of education and social utility: “This is an everyday story about everyday people. It is fiction, and yet it is not fiction.” The square-up assures us of the “seriousness” of the subject and the “sincerity” of the filmmakers and ends by reminding us that the events of the story “could happen to someone you love. It could even happen to *you*.” We enter the narrative at the municipi-

pal courthouse where a terrified Lois is asked to identify the accused abortionist, a silent harridan staring at her malevolently. Lois identifies the woman, and the judge eventually sentences her to ten years in the state prison. We then follow Dr. Fenton to his office, where he lights a pipe, and his nurse Jane helps him into his white doctor's coat.

He sits at his desk and begins to address the camera, telling us the story of Lois Marsh. The *mise-en-scène* underscores his medical authority: on his desk are medical books and a microscope, he is dressed in a white coat, and his role as genial elder is underscored by his pipe. Further, Jane, the nurse, is in a proper state of subservience, unlike the black-clad, mute, and threatening abortionist, who has usurped the access to Lois' body best left to professional medicine.

Doctor Fenton is an experienced, gentle, and progressive small-town doctor who is close friends with Lois Marsh's parents. He voices his concern for her in literally patriarchal terms: "If I had a daughter, I'd want her to be just like Lois Marsh. Bright. Pretty. Just past seventeen." As he recounts Lois's story, he is compassionate and sympathetic to Lois and Bob's struggles and vulnerabilities in a society that has left them bereft of education and guidance as they "deal . . . with impulses as old as the centuries." Schaefer observes that *Street Corner* and other "postwar [hygiene] movies continued to place a heavy emphasis on the dangers of sex while placing increased faith in science, medicine, and other forms of expertise."⁸ This world of expertise is contrasted with the "street corner" of the film's title, the informal network of peers, slightly older young people, and misinformed adults from which teenagers receive information about sexuality and the body in the absence of proper education from legitimate authority. The end of the line is exemplified by the abortionist herself, who plies her trade from behind a residential façade upon which a side reads, "Palmist," and when she speaks to Lois late in the film we hear a Teutonic or Scandinavian accent. These motifs link her with the superstitious, the blasphemous, and the foreign.

After her botched abortion, the bleeding and unconscious Lois is helped to Dr. Fenton's office by a kind male bystander. Dr. Fenton performs lifesaving surgery and immediately dresses down Lois' parents outside of her hospital room for not providing her with the information she needed, and for being unwilling to listen to her when she came to them for help. The indefatigable doctor then excuses himself to go to his weekly public lecture next door in the auditorium, and it is again time to draw aside the veil of false modesty, this time in the form of the films that accompany his lecture. We see illustrations of animated drawings of ovulation, fertilization, and implantation, and then, graphic medical

footage illustrating, in turn, the obstetrical delivery of a baby, the delivery of a baby by caesarean section (admittedly, the skill and speed of the obstetric surgeon in this footage is truly extraordinary), and the ravages of gonorrhea and syphilis on (mostly male) bodies and genitals. Here the audience finally gets what it paid to see, close-ups of human genitalia, albeit presented in as shocking and desexualized context as possible. After this series of meat shots, the film moves quickly through its denouement: Dr. Fenton finds Lois and her parents reconciled in her hospital room, and we return to his office, where he hopes one more time that we have learned a lesson from all of this, his nurse helps him out of his white coat, and the film ends.⁹

Doc Fenton's medical progeny would guide moviegoers through forbidden images of the body for at least another two decades. After the published findings of Alfred Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and other researchers took hold of the popular imagination, sexploitation films of the 1960s often featured prologs and epilogs of a psychiatrist or "sexologist" at his desk expressing hope that moviegoers would not suffer the fates that befell many of the films' characters. By 1970, many American theaters were successfully showcasing a new variation of this kind of movie, *Man and Wife*, distributed by a company called The American Institute for Adult Education. As David Lerner has shown, *Man and Wife* and its AIAE follow up, *He and She*, released later in 1970, were two of the first nationally distributed theatrical films to show unstimulated sexual intercourse while mobilizing many formal conventions of the documentary or educational film, including the onscreen presence of a male doctor instructing the audience on the importance of sexual satisfaction in maintaining a healthy and lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage. These "marriage manual" or "white coater" films (so named for the presence of the male figure of medical authority) successfully avoided prosecution by many state and local censor boards since the US Supreme Court's 1966 decision in *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* had ruled that in order for a work to be obscene and not subject to First Amendment protection the work taken as a whole must be "utterly without redeeming artistic, social, or educational value."¹⁰

Man and Wife begins with yet another exploitation film square-up crawl, this time quoting Dutch gynecologist T. H. Van De Velde's 1926 volume, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*. Then the filmmakers themselves weigh in with a square-up of their own, inveighing against the miseries caused (again) by "false modesty" and "puritanical attitudes" and assure us that they "have consulted several authorities on marriage problems" in the making of the film. Stock footage of a hospital

front provides a transition to our medical expert, a man in a dark suit seated at a green metal desk in what appears to be a wood-paneled basement rec room. His eyes shift beneath a massively Brylcreemed shock of gray hair, and the voice we hear is synced with the movement of his lips only some 70 percent of the time.

After he guides us on yet another tour of illustrations of the reproductive system, he describes a series of forty-nine sexual positions that are demonstrated by two young couples in what appears to be an adjacent space in the same rec room.

Some of what we hear is relevant to the acts we see onscreen. At other times, we hear pages turning and gain insight into how a man can tell that his wife is sexually aroused: If she has never borne children, the inner lips of her vagina turn from pink to bright red, but if she has been through childbirth, the same tissues turn “a deep wine color.” A young Joe Dante, reviewing the film upon its release for *Film Bulletin*, mocked the “seedy, desperate character who is supposed to approximate a doctor” and *Man and Wife*’s “[t]hin . . . disguise . . . as an educational, how-to-do-it manual for failing marriages (‘beats the legal rap wherever tested,’ proclaim the trade ads).”¹¹ Here is the framing medical discourse on the morning of its extinction, although it is interesting to note that Aquarius Releasing’s *Deep Throat* three years later featured both a pre-credits square-up and the (now parodic) inclusion of a medical doctor/gynecologist as a major character, played in broad comic style by Harry Reems.

Nina the Naughty Nurse Shows You How: Feminist Sex-Ed in the Age of Home Video

Neither the rumpled, dazed, and ill-synced “doctor” in *Man and Wife*, much less the mustachioed Harry Reems of *Deep Throat*, are likely to be reassuring figures to women moviegoers, then or now. In fact, one of the second wave of feminism’s most sustained, passionate, and detailed critiques of the role of women focused on the institution of medicine, particularly gynecology and psychiatry, and its role in the silencing and marginalization of women and their experiences.¹² Even the kindly, pipe-smoking Dr. Fenton was eventually revealed as complicit in the circumscription of female agency and autonomy. His entreaties for a frank discussion of sex and the body were unmasked as a softer form of control after women began to “look critically, and with strength, at the existing institutions serving us,” in the words of the preface to the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.¹³ The Boston Women’s Health Collective began

as a series of small discussion groups in 1969 in which women met to share their experiences and research a series of topics on women and their bodies that had never been adequately addressed by “doctors who were condescending, paternalistic, judgmental, and non-informative.” Their research findings were discussed, critiqued, and debated within a group of their peers, and eventually presented in a course that bore the title *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which was published in book form by the New England Free Press in 1973.¹⁴ The volume contained a highly detailed section of the long history of women as healers, wise women, and midwives that offered a fierce rebuttal of their centuries-long suppression through social institutions¹⁵ and stereotypical images of a piece with the frightening abortionist in *Street Corner*. The book’s section on women as healers and peer educators ends with a quote from Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English that imagines a world in which “wisdom about daily life is not hoarded by ‘experts’ or doled out as a commodity but is drawn from the experience of all people and freely shared by them.”¹⁶ *Our Bodies, Ourselves* presented a range of information and resources on relationships, sex, contraception, childbirth, abortion, and lesbian visibility, and its call for empowerment and its valorization of women’s shared wisdom drawn from personal experience was taken up by a wide and varied small press movement, whose books were sold to women’s specialty bookstores either directly or through regional and national small press distributors.

An entirely different approach to sexual education and contraception began as the Boston Collective was engaged in its first summer research project. The Adam and Eve company (incorporated as “Population Planning Associates”) was started in 1970 by Phil Harvey, a recent masters graduate in family planning at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, with years of experience working with CARE in India, and Dr. Tim Black, a physician recently returned from a period in New Guinea and Nigeria supervising family planning services and health clinics. Harvey and Black began a business selling condoms by mail in the US, marketing and advertising their product in softcore magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, (and later) *Oui*, and *Hustler*, and pouring much of the profits from this endeavor into family planning efforts overseas, including the establishment of the nonprofit foundation D. K. International. At this point, the Comstock Laws were still in effect, although the 1965 Supreme Court decision *Griswold v. Connecticut* had struck down a Connecticut law barring the sale of contraceptives to married couples. Harvey and Black could not assure themselves that all of their customers were married, but they pressed on, knowing that they were the only company in

America prepared to sell condoms through the mail on a large scale.¹⁷ With the advent of home video, Adam and Eve began to sell sexually explicit videotapes, and the company hired a panel of psychologists and sex therapists to screen their potential releases for content inimical to what the company termed a “positive” portrayal of sexual experience.

In 1986, during the Reagan-era alliance between right-wing Republican Attorneys General Edwin Meese and Richard Thornburg and anti-porn feminists (Andrea Dworkin, among others), the company was raided, harassed, and prosecuted in a number of jurisdictions by the Justice Department. This occurred right on schedule: As the post-Civil War technological innovations in the mass medium of print had threatened reformers who pushed the Comstock Act through Congress and backlash against the movie industry reached critical mass after the coming of sound and led both conservatives and progressives to support the more stringent Revised Production Code of 1933, the boom in home video of the early-to-mid 1980s stoked fears of the pernicious effects of sexually explicit images now loosed in the unguarded American home. And as in the past, censorship was initiated by Religious Right groups’ antagonistic response to the changing status of women who were, in the words of one “pro-family” author writing on Comstock’s legacy, able to appeal to liberals and feminists by “repackag[ing] the moral values of the Seventeenth Century in the language of ‘Reform.’”¹⁸

After eight years, Adam and Eve and its attorneys won their case in court, and the company soon began producing its own line of adult videos. Adam and Eve’s most high-profile video line became a series of sexual education videos directed by and starring the hugely popular porn actress Nina Hartley. Nina grew up in the Bay Area, the half-Jewish daughter of two left-wing academics. A self-confessed bookworm, she found her teenage sexual curiosity stultified by both the puritanism of many of the adult radicals who surrounded her and the increasingly shrill pronouncements of what she saw as sex-negative radical feminists who condemned all forms of prostitution and pornography. The two books that had the most profound impact on her were *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and Xaviera Hollander’s *The Happy Hooker*. The Boston Women’s Health Collective inspired her to study nursing and commit herself to women’s empowerment in healthcare. *The Happy Hooker*, with its first person account of another academically gifted, half-Jewish, athletic blonde tomboy, whose work in the sex industry was conducted with conscientious personal and professional integrity, suggested another career path to the young nerd from Berkeley.¹⁹ Hartley told the liberal

Jewish journal *Shmate* in 1987 that Hollander's forceful articulation of the necessary service she provided for the physical and emotional health of her clients, their relationships, and society as whole, helped her realize that work in commercial sex was possible for her. After meeting porn performer Juliet Anderson (a.k.a. "Aunt Peg") in 1984, Nina began working in porn and became one of the industry's most popular and prolific female stars.²⁰

The Adam and Eve titles were originally distributed on videotape and were the approximate length of a pornographic feature film, suitable for viewing in a single sitting, and like the feature, they contain non-diegetic music that often underscores heavily edited, stylized arias of transcendent sexual bliss that reach a climax in a final production number where the tips and techniques offered by Nina in the first sections have reached an unselfconscious virtuosity. *The Advanced Guide to Oral Sex* from 1998 follows this pattern. The video begins with Nina introducing her friends, two other women, Militia and Mandy Frost, and three men, Mike Majors, Steve Hatcher, and Tony Tedeschi. Nina demonstrates gentle oral foreplay on Mike, and Militia demonstrates a more vigorous technique. Next, Tony lays plastic wrap on Mandy's labia, and Nina explains how barrier oral sex on women is a way to play safe. Mandy and Militia demonstrate double fellatio on Tony with Nina coaching them on technique, and Nina puts on a glove to demonstrate G-spot stimulation on Militia. The final thirty minutes of the video is an orgy with all six participants, in which everything we have seen (with the exception of the plastic wrap dental dam) is integrated into the group play. The video ends with the simultaneous ejaculation of all three men onto Militia and Mandy, and Nina reminding the viewers at home to "play safe."

Since Nina graduated with honors with a degree in nursing, it is no surprise to find her showing us around a number of highly traditional anatomical illustrations near the beginning of several of her how-to tapes. But in one of the first of her Adam and Eve videos, *Guide to Better Cunnilingus*, many viewers were introduced to a new kind of visual aid, the Wondrous Vulva Puppet, made by House O' Chicks in San Francisco. The Vulva Puppet is a three-dimensional rendering of female genitalia whose entire purpose is to illustrate woman's ability to give and receive pleasure. The different layers, folds, colors, and textures of the puppet moved together and enabled sex-ed teachers, discussion group leaders, and porn performers to demonstrate in amplified detail how a woman's body can be touched by a lover. Centuries of male visualization of this zone had primarily concerned the course of the marathon swim under-

taken by spermatozoa on the way toward the ovum. The Wondrous Vulva Puppet, by contrast, was invented for women to visualize what they could feel but often were unable to see.

This emphasis on intuition was what set Nina's videos apart from other sex instruction tapes such as the *Better Sex Series* from the Sinclair Institute, which featured the voices (and faces) of therapists, counselors, and other experts providing the final word on sexual techniques, boundaries, and propriety. Nina was constantly urging her viewers to train themselves to listen to their own bodies. Early in her *Guide to Anal Sex*, she asserts that "of all of the parts of your body, nothing knows a liar like your anus, so if your mind is saying, 'Yes, yes!' and your heart is saying, 'No, no!' your anus will always, always listen to your heart." Later in the same video, she refers to the awareness of one's body and the ability to communicate with a partner while engaging in anal eroticism as a language in its own right. "You don't get ass, you earn ass. And you can't earn ass unless you learn to speak ass."

As popular discourses on "sex addiction" and porn's "desensitizing" effects on "healthy" (read genitally focused, monogamous heteronormative) sexuality intensified in the late 1990s and beyond, the always outwardly gracious Nina grew even more defiant in the new sexual flavors she urged her Adam and Eve fans to try. Where the earlier videos made with producer John Gault emphasized oral sex, swinging, and female bisexuality, the later guides produced with her partner and second husband Ernest Greene came to increasingly emphasize bondage, fetishism, and domination: *Guide to Sensual Domination 1: How to Submit to a Man* and *Guide to Sensual Domination 2: How to Submit to a Woman* appeared in 2001, *Guide to Spanking* in 2004, *Guide to Erotic Bondage* in 2005, *Strap on Sex* (ending with her "pegging" receptive male anal enthusiast Christian) in 2006, and *How to Submit to a Man*, *How to Submit to a Woman*, and *Foot Fun* in 2007.

At the same time the Adam and Eve guides were crossing over between the self-help and couples porn video markets in the 1990s, the small press movement was beginning its third decade making the voices of minorities, feminists, queers, radicals, and sexual outlaws heard by an increasing number of readers. Cleis Press, founded in San Francisco in 1980 by Felice Newman and Frédérique Delacoste, had an immediate impact with non-academic, activist-based books on a range of women's issues. Many of their books were controversial in the feminist community, such as their anthology *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* in 1987, edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander.²¹ In 1997, Cleis published *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*

by Tristan Taormino, and the book became one of the all-time, best-selling, sexual self-help books.

In addition to the background set of small press books on sex and feminism, Taormino's video adaptation of *The Ultimate Guide*, released by John "Buttman" Stagliano's Evil Angel Video, and her later work with Vivid-Ed take place in the wake of several changes in commercial pornographic video since Hartley had begun her work with Adam and Eve in 1994. *The Ultimate Guide* video appeared as the more heavily compressed medium of DVD was rapidly replacing videotape, and the later Vivid-Ed guides came out after online video-on-demand downloading made the individual scene, rather than the complete title, the basic unit of exchange. Each of these developments made both titles and individual scenes much longer, and now the scene became the arena in which a highly formalized and stylized range of positions and acts were staged to provide what Linda Williams calls "diff'rent strokes" likely to turn on the "diff'rent folks" in front of the screen.²² As some sex scenes in conventional porn stretched out to thirty-five or forty minutes with no musical accompaniment, the palpable artificiality of the markers of passion became painfully obvious, with female performers grunting or moaning for minutes at a time with the droning attenuated monotony of a La Monte Young musical composition.

Taormino and her co-directors Stagliano and Ernest Greene avoided the didactic boredom of the educational film and the generic boredom of much commercial porn by using a narrative arc which turned the sexpert Taormino into a compelling dramatic character whose often comic presence in the film was the farthest imaginable from the detached voice of medical or institutional authority. Thus, like *Street Corner*, *The Ultimate Guide* "is fiction, and yet it is not fiction." The film portrays Taormino's dramatized efforts to convince John "Buttman" Stagliano to bring *The Ultimate Guide* to video with Tristan herself directing and opens with her pitching the project in his office, radiating enthusiasm as the perpetually harried and bewildered Buttman worries about his business and her lack of experience.

The irrepressible Tristan says, "I know that I can do it. It's not going to be like those boring how-to instructional videos that are on the market now . . . I want to do it in traditional Buttman style. I want it to be gonzo, I want it to be real, I want it to be spontaneous, I want it to be hot, really hot so that women will run out and want to have anal sex!"

The movie's fascinating central conceit is that Tristan's courage in her initial journey as film director will mirror the intended audience's courage in initially exploring anal sex. Her audition for the role of director

consists of showing Buttman that she can help butt-shy porn performer Ruby take a hand in her ass, which she does with the help of a valise full of toys. Secure in her mission, she assembles a group of performers at Stagliano's house and replicates one of her seminars, which now entails a discussion with the male and female performers about their anxieties, experiences, and pleasures surrounding anal sex. She quickly discards her medical diagrams and uses the live bottom of none other than Nina Hartley to demonstrate anal foreplay. The middle section of the film intercuts discussions from the seminar with anal sex scenes featuring the performers illustrating the topics of the discussion. Throughout the film, Stagliano, Greene, and others remind us that "Tristan doesn't do sex," but during a final group photo shoot ostensibly for the video's box cover, Tristan is seduced by the half dozen porn professionals as Nina intones, "Madame Teacher, I think the tables have turned." As in the Nina Hartley videos, the final orgy illustrates many of the techniques demonstrated throughout the movie, and tribute is paid to porn convention when the three male performers ejaculate on Tristan's body. Then, in a candid demonstration of safer sex that is truly singular in the world of commercial heterosexual pornography, she smiles up into Buttman's camera and invites the HIV-positive Stagliano to put on a glove and put his fingers into her ass. Viewers who might be reticent to explore the topic of the movie can thus take courage from Tristan's own journey from the nervous, eager-to-please figure from the opening scenes to the blissed out (but still safe-sex-aware) sexual subject of the film's conclusion.

Taormino was later instrumental in convincing Vivid Video's Steve Hirsch to begin a new line of educational videos under the Vivid-Ed banner, and several of her early Vivid-Ed *Expert Guides* replicated the seminar structure of her workshops and showed her speaking to a diverse group of men and women onscreen before live models demonstrated sexual techniques in front of the group, but the onscreen audience only asked questions and provided reaction shots. Later releases drew upon the discussion scenes from Evil Angel's *Ultimate Guide* and her unscripted documentary-style pornos *House of Ass* (Adam and Eve, 2005) and the *Chemistry* series (Vivid, 2006 ff.) in having the performers share their experiences and preferences in interviews, which are then demonstrated in extended sex scenes with partners of their choice. Here is *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in X-rated action: Sexual performers are co-creators of the educational material, and the filmmakers emphasize the great diversity of the performers' desires, experiences, and responses. The sex scenes play out according to these desires and responses with no imperative to run through the range of "diff'rent strokes." Taormino's

control is largely exercised in pre-production, where she matches up performers using a complex series of spreadsheets that she has hinted in interviews are as intricate and incomprehensible to outsiders as an NFL playbook.

The Expert Guide to Female Orgasms from 2010 begins with Taormino seated on a sofa addressing the camera. A range of sex toys is on the coffee table in front of her, making her look like the Avon Lady of vibrators. After she introduces the topic, we see a montage of all of the female performers in the video talking about their unique, diverse, and in many ways incomparable experiences of orgasm, often using gestures and facial expressions to demonstrate the invisible feelings and physical sensations the camera can never hope to capture.

These shots of the female performers immediately displace our guide or host as the center or authority of sexual knowledge and experience. Taormino summarizes and provides transitions, allowing the performers to speak for themselves. Far from the passive sex objects portrayed elsewhere in the media (or the breathing protoplasmic medical illustrations seen in the hygiene and white-coater films), the women share their highly distinctive lived experiences. "We need to look at the whole picture," says Taormino. "Listen to women talking about their experiences and the feelings that go along with them." The male performers describe their observations on the varied physical signs and expressions of female orgasm and encourage viewers to pay close attention to their female lovers. Nowhere is there mention of a deep wine color. Like the white-coated doctors of old, Tristan presides over schematic illustrations of female anatomy, but these are stylized, playful, and artistic renderings and include the now de rigueur vulva puppet and a decidedly non-Brödel-like marker drawing of the deep structures of the clitoris with casual but neat handwritten indices.

The third scene of the film between Evanni Solei and Evan Stone completely dispenses with traditional choreography, blocking, and cinematography. After she tells Tristan that she needs a very slow buildup and that she likes Evan because he is funny (which he demonstrates by telling us that coaxing a female orgasm is like fly fishing), he kisses her and rubs his body on hers for several minutes. A full four minutes out of the twelve-minute scene show him giving her cunnilingus while stimulating her G-spot at a slowly but steadily increasing rate. The multiple cameras do not alternate between genital close ups and facial reaction shots; rather, each angle emphasizes either Evanni's whole body response or captures tiny minutiae of her changing facial expression: At one point, we see her tensed up face release for just a second into a tiny smile.

It is not until she experiences her first orgasm, three quarters through the scene, that Evan's penis makes an appearance. There is no fellatio, and intromission and intercourse occurs only to accent her enjoyment of clitoral stimulation using a Hitachi magic wand. We see no visible ejaculation, and the scene concludes with the viewer unsure if the look of closed-eye bliss on Evan's face is one of orgasmic release or delight in Evanni's second orgasm. Other parts of *The Ultimate Guide to Female Orgasms*, particularly the scene between James Deen and Taormino's "rough sex" muse Adrianna Nicole, feature the loud, pounding sex to which porn fans have become accustomed, but even these scenes dispense with mathematical recombination of positions and the alternating genital close-ups and facial reaction shots and focus instead on the women's moment-by-moment "physical, psychological, emotional, and even spiritual" experience of sex.

At the time of this writing, one of the more popular porn-related websites is Make Love Not Porn (makelovenotporn.com) a site run by web entrepreneur Cindy Gallop, in which readers are invited to send their observations on the difference between "Porn World" and "Real World." Gallop, who dates younger "Gen Next" men, discovered to her disappointment while in bed with many of them, that in the absence of effective and comprehensive sex education, hardcore pornography has become the de facto resource for young people learning about human sexual response. Instead of censorship, which is pointless and doomed to failure, she suggests a real-world counterbalance that engages with (often through direct mockery) rather than suppresses the reductive, repetitive, and uni-dimensional phallogentric sexuality on display in much commercial pornography. In a 2010 address at the conference L2: Generation Next, Gallop stated, "I believe that if more people were having more sex and more better sex, the world would be a much happier place and we would be further down the path to achieving world peace. More blow jobs, less world wars."²³

During a time in which the struggle over women's control of their bodies has become fierce and urgent and as the Religious Right continues its concerted and remorseless effort to halt comprehensive sex education, implement draconian censorship laws, impede marriage equality, and roll back women's access to birth control and right to abortion services, learning about greater sexual pleasure would seem to some a misplaced priority: In the first six months of 2011, states enacted 162 new provisions related to reproductive health and rights. The eighty abortion restrictions enacted that year more than doubled the previous record of

thirty-four abortion restrictions enacted in 2005.²⁴ Universal health care, a key goal of the women's health movement, remained a distant hope.

But the sexual pleasure and autonomy of women has been the major battleground in a war that has been fought on remarkably similar terrain for 150 years. The power to see, experience, and even imagine that pleasure has been wrenched from institutional controls for only a few short years through women educating themselves and each other through discussion groups, books, films, videos, and the Internet. Feminist pornographers are the next generation in this movement.

Notes

1. Chad Livengood, "Lawmaker Barred From Speaking After 'Vagina' Comment," *The Detroit News*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20120614/POLITICS02/206140467#ixzz20qEbTsXk>.

2. For accounts of Comstock's career and other censorship movements martialled against the post-Civil War publishing industry, see Nicola Kay Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

3. See Janet Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 259–74 and 288–91.

4. Dick Schultheiss and Udo Jonas, "Max Brödel (1870–1941) and Howard A. Kelly (1858–1943)—Urogynecology and the Birth of Modern Medical Illustration," *European Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Reproductive Biology* 86 (1999): 113.

5. *Ibid.*, 115.

6. This illustration is from Schultheiss and Jonas, 114.

7. Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

8. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 197.

9. At many roadshow engagements of the film, the film was stopped after Lois is rushed to the hospital and into the front of the auditorium strode "the eminent hygiene commentator, Mr. Curtis Hayes, in person" (in fact one of as many as a dozen fellows appearing under that name with different traveling packages of the picture). "Hayes" then made an impassioned pitch for two slender volumes, *Father and Son* and *Mother and Daughter*, available for one dollar each, as "nurses" circulated among the crowd.

10. David Lerner, "'White Coaters' at the Intersection of Sexploitation and Pornography," lecture, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, New Orleans, March 2011.

11. Many of Dante's *Film Bulletin* reviews were later reprinted in issues of *Video Watchdog* magazine under the running title, "Joe Dante's Fleapit Flashbacks." The review of *Man and Wife* appeared in *Video Watchdog* no. 83 (May 2002): 30.

12. A synoptic account of many of these critiques and the movement they launched can be found in Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969–1990* (Piscataway, New Jersey, 2002).

13. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), xix.

14. *Ibid.*, xvii.

15. *Ibid.*, 589–91.

16. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Expert's Advice to Women* (Garden City, NY, 1978), quoted in Boston Women's Health Collective, 594.

17. For an account of the formation of the company, see Phillip Harvey, *The Government vs. Erotica: The Siege of Adam and Eve* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 43–44.

18. Allan C. Carlson, "Comstockery, Contraception, and the Family: The Remarkable Achievements of an Anti-Vice Crusader," *The Family in America* 23, no.1, <http://www.profam.org/pub/fia/fia.2301.htm>.

19. Xaviera Hollander with Robin Moore and Yvonne Dunleavy, *The Happy Hooker: My Story* (New York: Dell Books, 1972).

20. Sheldon Ranz, "Interview: Nina Hartley," *Shmate: A Magazine of Progressive Jewish Thought*, no. 22 (Spring 1989): 15–19. Reprinted online at *The Smackdog Chronicles* (Ver. 2.6), <http://www.redgarterclub.com/SDChronBlog2dot5/about/nina-hartley-shmate-interview-pt1/>.

21. For an interview with Cleis Press founders Felice Newman and Frédérique Delacoste, see the Cleis website at <http://www.cleispress.com/features/about.php>.

22. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 27–32.

23. Cindy Gallop, "Make Love Not Porn," lecture, L2: Generation Next Conference, New York, NY, May 14, 2010, http://fora.tv/2010/05/14/Cindy_Gallop_Make_Love_Not_Porn.

24. Guttmacher Institute, "States Enact Record Number of Abortion Restrictions in First Half of 2011," *News In Context*, July 13 2011, <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/inthenews/2011/07/13/index.html>.

Calling the Shots: Feminist Porn in Theory and Practice



TRISTAN TAORMINO

Tristan Taormino (tristantaormino.com) is an award-winning author, columnist, editor, sex educator, radio host, and feminist pornographer. She is the author of seven books including *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* and *True Lust: Adventures in Sex, Porn and Perversion*. She runs the adult film production company Smart Ass Productions. She has directed and produced twenty-four adult films, including the groundbreaking series based on real female kink fantasies, *Rough Sex* and the Expert Guide sex education series, which she created for Vivid Entertainment. The winner of multiple Adult Video News (AVN) and Feminist Porn Awards, she was the first female director to win an AVN award for Best Gonzo Movie for the first film in her reality series *Chemistry*. She received the Trailblazer Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Feminist Porn Awards in 2010. She is the host of *Sex Out Loud*, a weekly radio show on The VoiceAmerica Talk Radio Network. She was a columnist for *The Village Voice* for nearly ten years and writes a column for *Hustler's Taboo*. She was the founding editor of the Lambda Literary Award-winning series *Best Lesbian Erotica* and is editor of twenty-five anthologies. She's written for a multitude of publications from *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* to *Penthouse*, and served as editor of *On Our Backs*. She has appeared on CNN, HBO's *Real Sex*, *The Howard Stern Show*, *Loveline*, *Ricki Lake*, MTV, Oxygen, MSNBC, Fox News, The Discovery Channel, and on over fifty radio shows. She lectures at top colleges and universities and teaches sex and relationship workshops around the world.

My passion for sex education made me a pornographer. In 1998, I published my first how-to book, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, and began touring the country teaching anal sex workshops, mostly at sex-positive sex toy stores. Many people asked me, "When are you going to do a video version of your workshop?" I'd watched sex-ed videos, and while they were clearly informative, I didn't

find them very sexy. If I was going to make an educational movie, I wanted to do something different. I wanted to make a film that not only taught people how to have safe and pleasurable anal sex, but was so hot that after watching it, they were inspired to run out and *do it*. I knew there would be plenty of explicit sex in the movie I envisioned and I would be in triple-X territory. I considered trying to self-fund and self-distribute an independent production, but then I'd only be preaching to the already converted. I wanted to reach the masses with my message. So I sent a proposal to several big adult companies asking them to fund an educational anal sex movie geared toward women that was also a hot porno. The people I made this pitch to responded as if I were speaking a foreign language, and they all ignored me or turned me down.

Months later, one of the people I sent a proposal to called me: John Stagliano, head of Evil Angel Productions, a well-respected industry mogul credited as the father of the gonzo genre (the cinema vérité of porn). Several conversations later, he agreed to produce my movie. That led to a crash course in porn production, where I was mentored by both John (who co-directed and shot the film himself) and well-known fetish film director Ernest Greene (who co-directed and co-produced). I came to the process with no filmmaking knowledge or experience and only a little familiarity with the industry, but plenty of confidence, enthusiasm, and idealism. I didn't bring any sex-war baggage from second-wave feminism with me; I never believed that all porn was degrading to women and awful, although some of it certainly was. I'd seen lesbian feminist smut films like *Suburban Dykes* and *How to Female Ejaculate*, so I knew that sex-positive, non-exploitative, revolutionary porn was possible.

I was determined to show authentic performances by women who truly enjoyed butt sex, real female orgasms, and condom use in addition to more realistic portrayals of anal sex than I'd seen in conventional porn—with communication between partners, plenty of lube, clitoral stimulation, and lots of warm up before intercourse. But I also had to meet the expectations that came with the Evil Angel name; Stagliano was known for his long, lingering shots of women's asses and hardcore anal action. There was no discussion or debate about how each scene would end: it would culminate with a money shot—when the male performer ejaculates on the female performer's body. Alternative endings were not an option, but I did put those feminist theory classes I took in college to some use: I declared there would be no facial cum shots in this production. *It's a porn trope! It's degrading! Women don't enjoy it!* My assertion surprised performers and probably annoyed John, although he didn't fight me on it.

Over the course of a seven-day shoot, the learning curve was steep. I made decisions, compromises, and my debut in front of the camera, not just as a sex educator, but as the subject of a full-cast group sex scene. I glimpsed a microcosm of the adult industry: performers with different levels of motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm for their jobs. In 1999, Evil Angel released *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*. It got a lot of attention, won several awards, and I even made a sequel, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women 2*. I was proud of my accomplishment, but never saw myself as a full-time pornographer. So I returned to my life of writing, editing, and teaching sex workshops.

In 2005, I decided to make porn a larger part of my work and return to the adult industry. My decision was fueled by my belief that gonzo was corrupt, female viewers continued to be mostly ignored or thrown the same formulaic bone, and porn hadn't reached its full potential.

I have always been a fan of gonzo as a genre because, as a viewer, I don't need high production values, elaborate sets and costumes, or contrived storylines in my porn. I love the spontaneity, raw chemistry, and organic feeling of gonzo. *Who cares if there's a light stand in the way, look at how intense their connection is!* By the mid-2000s, gonzo had gone wild—but not in a good way. The trend in gonzo was the more extreme, the better. It had become all about rough sex, multiple impalements (how many things can we fit into how many orifices simultaneously?), gaping assholes, and circuslike stunts. It was as degrading and offensive as any antiporn feminist's worst nightmare. The scenes were not about exploring dominance and submission, being rough, or pushing the envelope. The spirit of some seemed downright hostile. Plus, they lacked a fundamental component: female pleasure. I mean, if you're going to go to the trouble of calling a woman a slut and smacking her while you fuck her, there damn well better be an awesome orgasm in it for her. If she's not having a great time, what's the point?

Another reason that I decided to come back to porn was because the genre of “porn for women” wasn't growing or diversifying and there were few self-identified feminists making porn. When performer-turned-director Candida Royalle introduced the world to her “porn from a woman's point of view” in the late 1980s, she crashed the boys' club and proved that women and couples were a viable market. Her line of films focused on high production values, romance, and female pleasure and deliberately excluded conventions of mainstream porn, including extreme genital close-ups, anal sex, and external cum shots. When it debuted, everyone balked, but today, films aimed at couples and women

essentially replicate a lot of her formula. The dominant view within the industry is that couples and women want softer, gentler porn. This notion both reflects and reinforces stereotypes about female sexuality: we want romance and flowers and pretty lighting and nothing too hard. And that's true for some women, but *not all of us*. Women were left with few options from existing porn: "porn for women" stuck in an idea born in the late 1980s, gonzo gone in a direction that was often alienating, or other genres where they were left to fend for themselves in finding something appealing and not offensive. I wanted to create an alternative for women *and* men.

Ultimately, directing porn was a way to challenge myself. I could spout the theory, debate with antiporn feminists, and talk about the potential for porn to be revolutionary, but could I *do it*? Could I actually make a different kind of porn? In the time I'd been away from the industry, I worked as the editor of *On Our Backs*, the nation's longest-running porn magazine by and for lesbians. I'd directed dozens of photo shoots of explicit sex and what readers responded to most was the level of authentic desire and connection between the people. If I could capture that in a moving image, it could be even more palpable and powerful. The once-fledgling independent, lesbian-produced lesbian porn genre was enjoying newfound growth and diversity. It was time for me to bring feminist ideals to mainstream straight porn.

I signed an exclusive deal to direct for one of the largest companies in the industry, Vivid Entertainment, and my first project was a reality series called *Chemistry*. I wanted to return to the roots of gonzo, where the camera is acknowledged, the action is unscripted, and it's shot more like a documentary. I borrowed the premise of *Chemistry* from my love of reality television. I take a group of porn stars to a house for thirty-six hours. There is no script and no schedule and everything is filmed. They decide who they have sex with, when, where, and what they do.

I tell the performers before we begin shooting: *forget everything you know about porn*. Mainstream porn is very regimented and there is a strict formula for most heterosexual scenes. In the final edit, it looks like this: two minutes of fellatio, two minutes of cunnilingus (this is *optional*), two to three minutes of the first intercourse position, two to three minutes of the second position, two to three minutes of the third position, external cum shot. Sometimes there are slight variations, of course, but for the most part, that's it. First of all, it's boring and redundant. It's not the way people have sex off camera. And it doesn't leave much room for female pleasure: there is not a lot of warm-up before intercourse, intercourse is positioned as the goal and centerpiece of sex, and switching

positions so often interrupts the connection between performers and the momentum of building arousal (which could lead to orgasm). I'm interested in allowing the action to unfold organically (as organically as it can with lights, cameras, and people standing around you) and for people to move and fuck in ways they want to, for however long they want to. I want to empower the performers to show us what they want to do, to share a part of their sexuality with the camera. So much of porn asks performers to act out someone else's fantasy or do what someone else thinks looks sexy: what if they were given the opportunity to do their own thing? Plus, I give them their own camera (which cast members from *Chemistry's* prequel *House of Ass* dubbed "the perv cam") to shoot themselves and each other.

Unlike reality TV, it's not a random group of strangers. I cast one performer first, then ask for her "No List." This is standard industry procedure: all performers have a list of other performers they will not work with. Then I do something less common: I ask them for a "Yes List": Who do you have great chemistry with? Whose company do you genuinely enjoy? What about people you haven't worked with before, but who have piqued your interest? I choose the second performer from the Yes List, then repeat the process. So, before shooting begins, I know that everyone likes each other and is at best enthusiastic and at least open to having sex with most everyone else in the house.

In addition to the sex, I spend hours filming interviews with all the performers, which are intercut with the erotic action. Interviews have become very popular, sometimes as part of the beginning of a scene but more often as behind the scenes footage added as a "bonus" on a DVD. But like the sex, these interviews follow a common pattern. A camera pans over to a girl sitting in a chair getting her makeup done. A voice says, "Why don't you introduce yourself and tell us what's going on." She looks at the camera and says, "Hi, I'm Brandy, and today I'm gonna get fucked." And *scene*. That's it. As for the men of porn, in a typical video, they don't speak. In my experience, there are performers who actually have a lot more to say: about what they do for a living, why they do it, what they like, what they hate, and how it affects their relationships. They are self-aware, opinionated, and fascinating, in fact. It's important to give sex workers an opportunity to speak for themselves, something mainstream media rarely does. Many viewers have told me that they feel like they get to know the performers in my movies, and when they do, they are more invested in seeing them have sex. Suddenly they are three-dimensional human beings, instead of glossy sex robots. Performer interviews have become a staple in my work, and I incorporate them

into two other series I created and direct: my Expert Guide sex education series and my vignette series *Rough Sex*. Each of these series has a different focus and vision, but what remains constant is my mission to create feminist porn.

So, what is feminist porn? Some say it's an oxymoron, that no porn could ever be feminist. But lots of us disagree. However, that doesn't mean we *agree* on its meaning or a standard definition. So I will talk about what feminist porn means to me.

First, the production must be a fair and ethical process and a positive working environment for everyone. Performers set their own pay rates and know up front what I am hiring them to do; there is absolute, explicit consent and no coercion of any kind. They choose their sexual partners for the scene. There is mutual respect between performers and production crew. The work space is clean and safe. Performers must comply with the industry's self-mandated testing policy: testing for STIs every thirty days or less. They may request that their scene partners have a more recent test (some people, for example, have a personal policy of fifteen days). In addition, I offer everyone the option to use safer sex barriers, including condoms, gloves, and dental dams, and have those items on set.

These standards are important to me, along with making the set as comfortable as possible for performers. I'm asking them to perform a physically demanding job—get naked, have sex for a lot longer than civilians do, under hot lights, sometimes under difficult circumstances. I go out of my way to find out what they need to get that job done and do it well. Like to have your favorite flavor of Gatorade on set? A well-hydrated sex performer is a better sex performer, with more stamina and endurance. How about fresh, nutritious snacks to stave off low blood sugar and crankiness and a clean bathroom fully stocked with all kinds of personal hygiene products? To some, these sound simple, but they are significant. In sex work especially, I think there is a danger of folks dismissing these basic standards with “It's just porn” response. “It's just porn” stems from the sex-negative “It's just sex” concept prevalent throughout society, a sentiment that devalues sex work and sex workers and denies them the same fair treatment and labor policies as other kinds of workers.

As part of creating a positive work environment and to give performers an active role in how they are represented, collaboration is an important element of my process. Before we step foot on set, I have conversations with my performers, get to know them, ask them questions about their sexual likes and dislikes, favorite activities and toys, and what helps them have a really great work experience. I design their scenes around this information. Ultimately, I want the performers to partici-

pate in creating their own representations. Women and men are given choices: they choose who they will have sex with, they choose the positions they want to be in, they choose the toys they play with, all based on what feels good to them, all based on their actual sexuality, not a fabricated script. I want to capture complex, three-dimensional beings, rather than simplistic stereotypes. I want to create an open environment that's safe for everyone—and especially women—to take charge of their pleasure and be able to express their desires freely. I'm trying to capture some level of authenticity, a connection between partners, and sense that everyone's having a good time. Think of it as organic, fair-trade porn.

Feminist porn attempts to counteract the messages we get from society that can be reflected in mainstream porn: sex is shameful, naughty, dirty, scary, dangerous, or it's the domain of men, where only their desires and fantasies get fulfilled. In feminist porn, female desire, pleasure, and orgasm are prioritized and celebrated. When the sex on screen represents the experience of the performers (no one is "faking" anything) and that experience is set up to be positive and supportive, sex is presented as joyful, fun, safe, mutual, and satisfying.

Feminist porn both responds to dominant images with alternative ones and creates its own iconography. I consciously work to create images that question and contradict other pornography that represents men and women as one-dimensional objects—where men are sexual robots and women are vehicles for their pleasure. In a lot of mainstream heterosexual porn, the archetypical man is silent/stoic, always aroused and rock hard, dominant, assertive, and (judging by how their faces and much of their bodies are cut out of the frame) in the camera's way. Rarely are men bisexual, submissive, or passive, and rarely do they ask for directions, make their partner's pleasure a priority, or like their butts played with. Women are white, skinny, submissive, and big breasted. They are always ready for sex, they never say no, yet their pleasure isn't a priority. It's much more rare to see women of color, women who are non-skinny/large/plus-size, in charge, dominant, or submissive but also in control.

The intersection of sexuality and race in mainstream porn is complex territory with a history of inequality, stereotypes, and racist depictions. One need only look at titles in the so-called "ethnic" genres of Asian, Latin, or black (because, in mainstream porn, you can only be one)—like *Slant Eyed Sluts*, *Naughty Spanish Maids*, and *Big Black Asses*—to see how race is exoticized, fetishized, and commodified in very particular ways. I believe that feminist porn must reject the typical ghettoization of people of color by refusing to participate in the unspoken yet systematic exclusion of performers of color from certain kinds of films. Often,

performers of color are cast only in “ethnic” movies, and roles in features, vignettes, and other genres go to white performers. Whiteness is assumed in porn unless it’s labeled otherwise, which positions white as the unspoken and uncontested norm.

I cast performers of color in every film I make as part of my commitment to racial diversity and for several other reasons: to challenge long-held practices of denying performers of color the same opportunities as white performers; to create a platform to openly discuss race in the adult industry in their interviews; and to give them the chance to participate in their representation with an eye toward shifting prevailing attitudes among producers and consumers. I’m committed to combatting stereotypical portrayals on every level: I refuse to use race-specific, and often demeaning, language on box covers and in marketing materials.

Feminist porn creates its own iconography and is committed to depicting diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class, body size, ability, and age. Feminist porn also challenges what constitutes sex itself and the heteronormative depictions of penis-in-vagina (or ass) intercourse as the ultimate, climactic act and everything else as some sort of inconsequential window dressing. Feminist porn moves beyond pigtailed virgins, sex kittens, and hyperorgasmic nymphos, toward more complex and varied representations of femaleness and femininity, including what constitutes beauty, desirability, and sexiness. It does the same for men and masculinities, challenging the fixed, stereotypical ways in which male sexuality is depicted. Some people mistakenly believe that feminist porn is concerned only with women. We cannot fight gender oppression and attempt to dismantle rigid gender roles unless we expose all of the fallacies of gender. The ways in which men are treated and depicted in porn must also be part of the feminist agenda.

There are so few places where the public and private spheres collide so explicitly and their false dichotomy is exposed so literally; plainly, porn is one of the only places where we can watch other people interact sexually. Feminists can use porn as a platform to model diverse modes of sexual desire, fantasy, communication, pleasure, and orgasm—diversity that is sorely lacking in other forms of media. If people learn from porn (and that’s still a big if), why not give them sexual role models who explicitly ask for what they want, use lube and sex toys, and take more than two minutes to get aroused and achieve orgasm? Feminist porn also works to represent sex not as a stereotypical power imbalance but as a space to play with power and eroticize consensual power exchange, where the differences between sexual agency and sexual roleplay are clearly articulated.

I place so much emphasis on the process of making porn because it's difficult to designate what a feminist porn *image* looks like. When I made my first film, I embraced the notion that certain depictions were turn-offs to all women, like facial cum shots. But my thinking on this has changed over time. I believe viewers appreciate consent, context, chemistry, and performer agency more than the presence or absence of a specific act. But the libido is a tricky thing; what turns us on may be disconnected from or in opposition to our social and political values. As a filmmaker, I'm conscious of the dangers of repetition of a specific act like a facial cum shot and what it could signify, specifically that men's orgasms represent the apex of a scene (and of sex itself) and women's bodies are things to be used, controlled, and marked like territory. Although I am trying to make a different kind of porn, once I put it out in the world, I can't control how it's received. Some people may grasp what it is I'm trying to do; others may simply see a hot film that turns them on. Ideally, people get it *and* get off on it. What sets feminist film apart from others is that I have a clear agenda behind its creation. I consider my smut-making political. I think making porn can be a political act, one that is just as valid and valuable as other forms of activism within the feminist movement.

I don't want to paint an unrealistic picture. There are complexities and contradictions inherent in producing porn. I was confronted with some of them during that very first shoot with Evil Angel, and I struggle with them still. I want performers to feel pampered and valued *and* I have a limited budget. I want the atmosphere to be pressure-free *and* I only have this location for a certain number of hours. I want you to work with your favorite co-star *and* he just called in sick and needs to be replaced. Sometimes everyone has to make it work within the existing limits, and some days feel more limited than others. But when it all comes together, it feels amazing.

What is most gratifying about my work is the response from the performers and production crew members I work with. Performers tell me it's the best experience they've ever had on a set. I don't pay them any more than anyone else does, but the atmosphere is fun and safe, and I treat them well. In some circles, I have a reputation for spoiling the performers. I get their favorite food, lube, and sex toys for them. Let me be clear: I don't spoil them, *I value them*. I value them as human beings, as sex workers, as performers, and I value the work they do. I hope they internalize this value and I raise their expectations for what a work experience can be.

Porn is a multibillion-dollar industry and a prevalent, powerful cul-

tural medium. Are feminists a minority in the adult industry? Absolutely. But if we ignore or dismiss porn, I think we walk away from a significant opportunity. The process of making porn cannot only be consensual, it can be safe, professional, political, empowering, and fun. As a feminist, I consciously choose to engage what some feminists call an enemy of women and to challenge the status quo of a historically male-dominated industry. Instead of using my energy and resources to silence others' voices and visions by campaigning against bad porn, I choose to add my voice and vision to the mix. Feminist pornographers contradict the narrative of women working in porn being duped, objectified, and powerless. We are not predatory, seedy people who pluck Midwestern girls from bus stations and force them to do things they don't want to do (I still haven't met any of those guys). We challenge the conventions of a male-dominated industry and disrupt antiporn rhetoric about the evils of men and their exploitation and degradation of women.

I often have the opportunity to sit alongside women in powerful positions in the porn industry on panels at various events. At a recent one, a producer said, "My mission is to create adult entertainment, I don't have any illusions that I can change the world or anything." I was struck by her statement and realized immediately that I disagree. I do feel like I can change the world—one feminist porn film at a time.

Our Pornography



CHRISTOPHER DANIEL ZEISCHEGG a.k.a. DANNY WYLDE

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A friend and fellow adult performer, Paris Kennedy, invited me to her place for dinner. Over a meal of home-cooked vegetable lasagna, she and her partner, adult fetish producer Alex Bettinger, proposed an idea.

“We want to start a book club,” Bettinger told me. “But for people in the industry.”

“Sounds like fun,” I replied.

“It would be more than just a club,” added Bettinger. “I’d like for us to have filmed roundtable discussions on each book we read. And I’d like to put some excerpts online for people to watch.”

“So what would we be reading?” I asked.

“I’d like to start with this.” Bettinger handed me a paperback by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Chris Hedges, titled *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*.

It’s not what I expected. I thought we’d be picking out cherished novels and sharing them with a group of friends. But Bettinger and Kennedy have something different in mind. They want in-depth discussions on the nature of our industry. And they want to start with Chris Hedges’s stance on pornography. That stance, I soon learn, is one of virulent criticism.

“I recommend reading the whole thing,” said Bettinger, “but I’d like for you to at least finish the chapter on porn.”

“It’s actually very interesting,” Kennedy added. “It takes a lot to hold my attention when I’m reading something like that.” By *that*, she means a fierce attack of her chosen profession.

“Hedges has some valid points, but it’s not an academic piece,” said

Bettinger. "It's a polemical piece. He takes what I believe are extreme examples, and uses them to build the foundation of his argument."

"Well, let me write down the title, and I'll see if I can pick it up at the local book store," I said.

"No," replied Bettinger. "This copy's for you."

The following day, I begin reading. The second chapter, "The Illusion of Love," deals exclusively with pornography. Hedges's central point is that porn strips away human qualities of connection, such as love and intimacy, and offers only cruel, superficial, and often brutal sex. On the topic of female adult performers, Hedges writes, "The one emotion they are allowed to display is an unquenchable desire to satisfy men, especially if that desire involves the women's physical and emotional degradation."¹ Hedges does not write that *sometimes* women in porn serve no other purpose but to satisfy men and beg for sexual abuse. He doesn't write that *often* or *usually* women serve such a purpose. His claim is all encompassing: all porn portrays and perpetuates sexual violence, often against women.

Hedges primarily interviews individuals who share his beliefs. Shelly Lubben, an ex-porn star and founder of the Christian outreach program Pink Cross, describes porn performers as drug users who need to numb themselves, adding that they check out mentally, and "turn themselves off emotionally and die."² Another ex-porn star, Patrice Roldan (a.k.a. Nadia Styles), talks about her time as a performer, "I would say, 'Treat me like a little slut,' or 'I'm your bitch,' or 'Fuck me like a whore.' I would say the most degrading things I could say about myself because I thought this was what it meant to be sexy and what people wanted to hear . . . You are just a slut to those who watch. You are nothing."³

Even interviews with people still active within the industry do nothing to paint a brighter picture. Adult film director Jim Powers tells Hedges that years ago porn stars were actresses who were serious about their work. But now, "They are hookers. They don't care. They are a throwaway commodity in a throwaway world."⁴

Hedges continues his assault on the industry by describing the racist depictions of ethnic minorities in many porn films, the outrageous circuslike acts performed, the misogynistic language plastered on DVD box covers and websites, and the seemingly atrocious exploitation of unwilling participants. He concludes, "the violence, cruelty, and degradation of porn are expressions of a society that has lost the capacity for empathy."⁵

After setting down my copy of *Empire of Illusion*, I half-believe that

porn is a malicious force, worthy of scorn by any ethical standard. But I am a porn performer and producer, and I am capable of love, empathy, and remorse. I am armed with a conscience, and I feel responsible for my actions. Despite Hedges's allegations, I feel a significant lack of guilt. While my own experience as a performer is duly subjective I am entirely comfortable making this statement: *I am a pornographic performer and I do not participate in the exploitation or degradation of fellow performers.* And I say this acknowledging the privilege I hold as a white, heterosexual male performer. That said, I do not necessarily dispute Hedges's findings. In fact, I have experiences of exploitation that may actually validate them.

During a live cam session, a fan wrote to me about a scene I had performed with an older gay man. I did not remember doing the scene, and asked the fan to provide more information. He sent me a link to a website where I saw a frightened-looking, nineteen-year-old version of myself receiving oral sex from a man in his midfifties.

Seeing the video, I easily recalled the experience. The man had lured me to his apartment through an ad on Craigslist. I was under the impression that I would be auditioning on video for a role in a future porn production. Halfway through the encounter, I discovered that the man wanted me there for his personal pleasure. He offered me extra money in exchange for sucking my cock. I was poor, so I took the cash. Five years later, I learned that the man not only lied about it being just an audition, but continued to profit from that encounter by hosting a video of it on his paid subscription-based website. His actions were exploitative, and I felt taken advantage of. He had claimed one agenda, then waited until I was naked and vulnerable to reveal another. Had it been my first porn experience, I may have never ventured back. But I had already worked for people in the industry who were honest about their intentions, paid me well, and treated me with respect. I knew that porn could be a legitimate business.

During my first porn shoot, I was tied up, whipped, electrocuted, and fucked in the ass. It was a BDSM scene for Kink.com (called Cybernet at the time). Sure, some aspects of this shoot were physically painful, but I was informed of every act before it took place, given options and safe words, and surrounded by professionals whose job it was to safeguard my physical and emotional well-being.

On the surface, I may have appeared to be in a better scenario with the man from Craigslist than in the BDSM scene. But the man from Craigslist had taken advantage of me, and later exploited me, selling

the video in which I appeared without my knowledge. Even though the BDSM scene may have appeared violent to some, I chose to participate and knew exactly what was going to take place.

Some porn may represent sexual inequality at its most demeaning, but we may not be able to confirm that the performers were *actually* dehumanized, or if they were engaging in consensual role-play. Other porn can represent a sexual power dynamic but also emphasize the informed and enthusiastic consent of its performers. Companies such as Kink.com employ before-and-after interviews with performers to establish consent. The use of elements designed to convey consent, such as interviews, help facilitate discussions around rough and violent sexual fantasies, and position the people who make porn as not only responsible to each other, but also to their consumers. In fact, all of the self-identified feminist pornographers I've worked with explicitly emphasize consent and ethics in their work. Likewise, there are plenty of other porn makers—from Kink.com to players in the mainstream adult industry—who do as well. I have conducted extensive interviews with mainstream industry producers, directors, and performers who are committed to making “ethical porn.” I've posted the interviews in full on my blog. Performers have told me what differentiates a safe work environment from one that is degrading or disempowering: open negotiations and communication between performers, a good working relationship with the director, and knowing everyone's expectations and limits up front. They cite the critical difference between domination and degradation: consent.

So a great level of responsibility lies with directors, agents, and everyone else engaged in the production of porn. They are tasked with making sure performers are willing to participate, and then ensuring their health and safety on set. All producers should commit to providing a level of transparency so that consent not only exists, but is explicitly conveyed to viewers.

Hedges fails to acknowledge that some porn companies establish parameters of respect and consent which performers must abide by. For example, I am regularly employed by Naughty America, one of the largest providers of Internet pornography. Naughty America has a company policy that male performers do not spit on, choke, or slap female performers. A female performer may be spanked on the ass, but she must ask for it first. A male performer cannot call a female performer a “bitch,” “cunt,” “whore,” or any other derogatory term. In fact, it is preferred that he say as little as possible throughout the scene.

I have been hired by directors for Vivid, Heartcore Films, Madison

Bound Productions, Sweet Sinner, and others who facilitate discussions around sexual desires, turn-ons, attraction to fellow performers, limits, and so on. Some of these companies will gladly film acts of rough sex, but only if those involved express a sincere desire to participate. My experiences suggest that porn does not have to be a process of human degradation. It can be quite the opposite.

There may, however, be a gray area for porn viewers who have aggressive sexual fantasies, and yet view themselves as ethical consumers. The purchase of a commercial product includes the choice to financially support its mode of production. If consumers buy more of a certain kind of porn, then more of that kind of porn will be produced. The issue is that, unlike food or clothing, porn lacks the support of consumer advocates who might designate which studio, director, or line of films is essentially safe to purchase from an ethical standpoint.

In the midst of this dilemma, I think it is important to point out that porn is still a form of entertainment. It should be held accountable to the same standards placed on other forms of capitalized entertainment, not subject to more of them. If standards are to be implemented, I believe they should be self-enforced. The history of censorship is too awash with personal subjectivity and bias to delegate something as intricate as sexual fantasy/practice to any single person or organization. It is the ethical pornographer's responsibility to operate with transparency. It is the performer's responsibility to voice consent or a lack thereof. If consumers want to see more movies that will get them off and leave them with a clear conscience, it is their responsibility to seek those films out. It's time for consumers who want more ethical porn to educate themselves about who's producing it, and to use their dollars to support it. At every level of the process, people have some control over the kind of porn they create and support. This is our pornography.

Notes

1. Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 57.

2. *Ibid.*, 60.

3. *Ibid.*, 62.

4. *Ibid.*, 78.

5. *Ibid.*, 74.

Uncategorized: Genderqueer Identity and Performance in Independent and Mainstream Porn



JIZ LEE

Jiz Lee is a genderqueer porn star known for their androgynous look, female ejaculation, vaginal fisting, strap-on performances, and fun, sex-positive attitude. The award-winning performer prefers the pronouns “they/them,” and advocates for ethical pornography that creatively and authentically reflects queer sexuality. Ever fascinated by the radical potential of sex, love, and art, Jiz runs a personal blog and philanthropic “Karma Pervs” pay site at JizLee.com. They are editor of the upcoming anthology *How to Come Out Like a Porn Star: Essays from the Porn Industry on Family Matters*.

I'm wearing a bright pastel blue suit I hand-dyed myself to match the suit worn by David Bowie in his music video for “Life on Mars.” I'm a dapper version of Bowie, standing for photos with a golden glammed-up Adrianna Nicole in one of the biggest and most outlandishly decorated homes I've ever seen. Adrianna has handpicked her co-stars, creating scenes from her personal fantasies. She reclines on a white chaise lounge, gold lamé legs wrapped around me, wide eyes hungry. My large, flesh-colored strap-on cock juts out from the fly of my David Bowie blue pants and my hand pushes forcefully into her mouth. It all feels so good. Warm, wet, incredibly intimate. My fingers probe her wide mouth. I could do this for hours. At some point, I see a trace amount of blood in her saliva, tinted spit against the white of her teeth. I hesitate for a second, but she lets me know she's fine. We fuck in different positions, ending as Adrianna cums hard with a Hitachi Magic Wand against her clit and my thumb pressed far up her pink ass.

Pause. Rewind. Let's watch the scene from the beginning. Where does this porn really start? Maybe in 2005, on a bright San Francisco day, where I met an erotic photographer named Syd, and I hit on her. My desire was twofold: I wanted her and I wanted to create sexual art.

I was curating a queer Asian Pacific Islander (API) dance performance and the theater I rented had a large lobby with empty wall space that would be perfect for visual art to complement the show. Syd's work was part of a queer Asian women's art show titled "SLIT," and her large prints of androgynous Hapa (mixed-heritage) queers in BDSM scenarios portrayed an element of sexuality that I could relate to. It's not often I see artists I could identify with, other queers like me. I felt a magnetic familiarity with Syd and the models in her photographs. An attractive, brainy art student with a muscular build, Syd's freckled cheeks held a blend of American-European and Japanese ancestry; her slightly butch demeanor was contrasted by curly light brown hair in pigtails. It was genderqueer Hapa love at first sight.

Weeks later, I found myself in her bedroom talking about her work, which decorated the walls of her small apartment in the Mission. After agreeing on which of her prints we'd hang, I casually mentioned that I would be interested in modeling for her if she was doing any new projects, to which she responded positively; she added that if I were interested in being filmed, a friend of hers was starting a queer porn company and was casting. She pulled out a Post-it note and wrote a phone number and the name "Shine Louise Houston."

Six months later, Syd and I were lustfully dating . . . and preparing for our first scene together in what would become a smash dyke porn hit, *The Crash Pad*. I say our dating was lustful, but I'm not sure if that's the right word. Libidinous? We would *plow* over each other at sweaty queer dance parties, making out like ravenous, rabid dogs in heat. We were in love, in the most limerence-is-a-drug state imaginable, our orifices and sexy parts engorged extensions of the braingasms we had for one another. I don't think our connection can be put into words; it was best expressed through art and on several occasions, as we made love on film.¹

People often ask me, "What made you decide you wanted to do porn?" and I tell them the truth: I want to share my sexual expression with others. I like it, it feels liberating, and I know that it helps others feel free too. I want to show more representations of people like me. I use words like hegemonic, homonormative, and marginalized. These are words I learned as I put myself through college, but I knew the meanings before I earned my degree. I share stories about people who have written to me, thanking me for putting my sexuality out there, for helping them become proud and stronger in their own battles. All of this is true and it's a part of why I did it. But what I don't say is: I did it for love.

And by that, I mean simply that I wasn't really thinking about it.

When I did my first feature, I wasn't a porn star. I was going to do one film with Syd to see what it was like. And I loved it. When I did my second feature, I remember expressing in an interview: "I'm not a [air quotes] 'porn star.' I'm just me." However several films and awards later, and most certainly a porn star, people ask me, "What made you decide to do porn?" and I now reply that each and every project is still a decision to do porn. To keep doing it, and to do it while being "just me."

As a queer performer, I strive to be as authentic as I can, celebrating visibility and using porn as a tool to educate and validate our lives. When Hollywood rewrites and recasts our experiences, and schools ignore our histories and sexual education, queer porn is one of the few mediums that can explicitly tell our stories. As I explore my role in the industry, from indie to mainstream, I question the ways in which I can do porn and be visible while continuing to be myself.

Without agents in the business, I've developed my own organic process that includes meeting directors and costars first before agreeing to shoot with them. If I felt they've understood me and I could trust them to represent me accurately, I'd give working with them a shot. For the most part, it's worked brilliantly.

It's also created some interesting scenarios, each a challenge for me to test the ways in which I navigate my gender expression and other identities in an industry best known for its hyper exaggerations of gender and the physical attributes of sex; where well-endowed men and big-breasted women prevail, I find myself curiously outside the box. I'm queer. And though to the untrained eye I may seem like a lesbian, I'm not.

I'm not even a girl.

While many first-time fans and porn reviewers may read me as a lesbian, I think my own gender and sexuality—and often, the identities of my lovers too—exceed beyond "women loving women." I am queer and have all different kinds of lovers on film and in my personal life. I've performed with men, both trans and cisgender, and with other genderqueers as well as with trans and cisgender women. I think because I've done most of my mainstream work with women, and because I was "assigned female at birth," and appear to most viewers as "a girl" when naked, many assume that I am a lesbian.

I don't mind so much being read as a woman, if it means that I can bring dyke visibility or butch visibility to a larger audience. But if someone wants to really know me, they'll understand that my gender is fluid, androgynous. For the last few years I've been vocal about my preference for the pronouns "they/them." I feel it's the most commonly used gender-neutral pronoun in the English language. Not everyone shares my

opinion however. I've even had a journalist outright *refuse* my request of preferred pronouns because she sees them as grammatically incorrect. Her article, on the subject of queer porn, was published describing me with feminine pronouns—something I found even more offensive than the fact that she also described me as “exotic.” Singular pronouns have been used by the English for centuries, and modern social media sites like Facebook use they/them when a person's gender is unspecified—so it's really not all that unusual of a pronoun choice, and so far it's the closest I've found to a neutrality that makes me feel comfortable.

Of the several things I call myself, the one I struggle with most in my work is the word “genderqueer.” I don't identify as a woman, nor do I identify as a man. To me, genderqueer is a conscious queering of gender, or an aware nongendering. Oddly, occupying this fluid, undefined status is the most secure I've ever felt. It took a long time to find. I was a slutty tomboy who yo-yo'd through subcultures trying to find a sexuality that fit. Long hair or no hair, goth makeup, short skirts, hoodies, khakis, high heels, ties, sagging jeans, the pages of my photo albums read like extreme makeovers. *What am I?*

When I first learned the word “transgender,” I thought I might be better suited as a man. However, after a summer of discovering new social pressures beyond butch, I quickly realized that I didn't want to be a man any more than I wanted to be a woman. Yet it was within a trans identity that I realized gender is fluid, and that my body, strong in some ways and soft in others, was already perfectly suited for me. It became my canvas for art and sex.

What a discovery to find that gender could be a tool, even a sex toy! Expression can be playful, erotic. I found it comfortable to explore my femininity in queer porn. I was performing with friends and lovers, for friends and lovers. San Francisco's queer porn scene is about being sexy in your own skin, reclaiming sexuality for ourselves. Playful or not, I could look exactly the way I wanted to and others like me would find it sexy. I didn't have to change a thing.

For example, the decision to shave my legs for queer films, like *Superfreak*, was my own. The key is that it is a choice, not an ultimatum. Once I was booked to work with a mainstream company and two days before the shoot, the producer found out I usually shoot while “naturally hairy.” I was told immediately that I was required to shave everything for the scene. My choice in that situation was to decline the shoot. Similar sentiments about hair have come from other companies; “Please shave; we're trying to sell movies to people in the midwest.” Here we see cisgender

pressures based on my perceived female presentation for (queer-phobic) straight male consumers; these companies want me to look more like a woman.

Choice, or performers' sexual agency, is one of the main differences between queer porn and mainstream genres. Recently, I suggested using dental dams on a "lesbian" set in Los Angeles and the director laughed at me, saying flat-out, "No, you can't use a dental dam. No one would want to watch that; it's not sexy." I love safer sex and jump at the chance to portray it on camera. I can even ejaculate, forcefully, against a firm dental dam; feeling safer makes me more confident and sexy. If there's one thing that makes queer porn different, it's respecting a performers' choice—the choice to safely fuck how they want and to look how they believe is sexy.

I'm used to sex-positive productions with queer porn companies, however being outside the bubble helps reinforce my values and better define my objectives. What started as performing for my community, has now afforded me the opportunity to perform for those outside my community, and there's power in that, especially when it comes to fucking within the nuances of the mainstream.

Mainstream porn relies on categories and this naturally involves a lot of assumptions. A porn website employee in an office somewhere combs through porn scene after scene, clicking various boxes that "describe" the scenes: #lesbian, #big ass, #brunette, #asian, #fingering, #strap-ons. Or maybe: #small tits, #short hair, #white, #lesbian, #doggy-style. My co-stars and I could be perceived many different ways, depending on hairstyle, the lighting, the person clicking the boxes. When am I white? Asian? Lesbian? The labels are quick attempts at descriptions I'm not even sure are useful to a consumer, but it's fascinating as a performer to be labeled something you're not, or not completely.

Being tagged online is not much different than interacting with strangers while walking down the street or while applying for a job. At various times, I'm not sure if I'm being read as something I may or may not be. At least with a tag on the Internet, I can tell how someone else has read me. Queer porn usually doesn't tag like mainstream porn does, which is why that's where I feel the most comfortable. A queer porn movie can have various porn scenes that include people who might be trans, femme, boi, fag, cisgender, queer, and more. The range of diverse representations is a lot greater than in mainstream productions; in queer works, you'll find performers of all sizes, a higher percentage of people of color, and different displays of gender expression. There's too much to categorize. Boxes fly out the window.

I've experienced great reward in being visibly outside the box. I'm

proud to have mainstream websites like *Fleshbot.com* refer to me by my preferred gender pronouns, and educate their readers on my gender identity. I'm thrilled to have been nominated AVN Awards Best New Web Starlet—sending countless online visitors to my website where they can learn more about me. Through my blog and work in the industry, I was honored as Feminist Porn Awards' "Boundary Breaker," a title I now share with its previous winner Buck Angel. Accepting the award, I wept and professed my gratitude for colleagues in the industry who value and understand my identity, helping me to feel more accepted and empowered in pornography than I have at any other time in my life.

It's true that I've gained so much from porn, something many consider a four-letter word, but I respect as being so much more. For one, performing publically has helped build my confidence in writing and overcome my fear of public speaking. I've presented at a handful of academic institutions, from Mills College to Stanford University. I'm now even an independent studies advisor at California College of the Arts. I've also led workshops on impact play, fisting, bondage, and queer sex topics, and have traveled outside the United States to appear at award ceremonies and film screenings in Canada and Europe. I was the first in my graduating class to completely pay off my student loans, and I was able to pay for LASIK eye surgery through funds raised from sex work. I've raised thousands of dollars through my membership website *Karma Pervs* to benefit queer, sex-positive, and kink-friendly nonprofit organizations. And I've met some of the warmest, smartest, and most supportive people I know. It feels like a calling more than a career. It feels fun, which is how I like it.

My mixed identities have led me to conclude that there's no right or wrong, no definitive experience, no one way of looking at the world. Nothing is black or white, and that fact is even clearer when you're gray. I believe there's beauty and education in inconsistency and contradiction, in the vulnerability and constant questions that come with passing as one ethnic identity or another, one gender identity or another, one sexual identity or five more. I sit on a fence, as the saying goes, and I don't mind because if the angle is just right, it feels really, really good.

Notes

1. We collaborated between 2005–2009 as the performance art duo "twincest." A mirror of our emotional relationship, we separated with a piece on death. Our epiphany is the website *twincest.net*.

Being Fatty D: Size, Beauty, and Embodiment in the Adult Industry



APRIL FLORES

April Flores, flame-haired vixen of the new porn order, is one of the most striking examples of the new sexy, from her work as a BBW adult film star to her unrepentant feminism and body-positive smashing of stereotypes. Flores has graced the covers of *Bizarre* and *AVN* magazines, been featured in several fine art photography books, and appeared in adult films in every genre of the porn industry. April lives and creates in Los Angeles with her husband, artist Carlos Batts.

Growing up, I was always larger than most of my classmates. The word used to describe me then was *chunky*. I wanted nothing more than to be thin. I spent my teenage years believing that my life would be a thousand times better if I was skinny. In my early twenties, I lost a lot of weight and became thin. Yet I was still unhappy. I realized that life is the same no matter how fat or skinny you are, and that happiness is a choice. Once I understood that, everything changed and my confidence grew.

In 2000, I met photographer and director Carlos Batts. He expressed interest in shooting photographs of me in a bikini. I was apprehensive. I had never done anything like that, but I didn't want to let my inexperience get in the way of trying something new. I was also flattered and excited that I had inspired an artist. During our very first meeting, he said that we could change the world together.

We did the photo shoot, and I remember waking up the next morning with an overwhelming feeling of empowerment. Being able to put aside my self-doubt and trust the artist I was working with gave me a tremendous sense of satisfaction. I modeled for still photos, continuing to work with Carlos and a handful of other photographers, for several years. Carlos had taken to calling me "Fatty Delicious" as a term of endearment. When it came time to create a stage name for my website, Fatty D. seemed like it would work nicely.

After working for a while in photography, Carlos and I decided to

use video as an alternative artistic medium. We wanted to document our lives. I began masturbating while Carlos filmed it. My first solo performances were eventually included in our first distributed film, *Alter Ego*.

In 2005, I met the porn super star Belladonna; she saw photos of me in Carlos's book *Wild Skin*, and invited me to do a scene with her in one of her movies. I was drawn to the offer. She was warm, friendly, and sexy. I had made out with women before, but she was the first woman I had sex with. I was very nervous on the day of the shoot, but it went beyond my expectations in the best way possible. We shot in her studio, and the only people there were the two of us, her husband, who ran the camera, and Carlos. The environment was relaxed, perfect for a first-time shoot. I was able to fully focus on the performance and my connection with Belladonna. I thought performing in porn would be a one-time thing. But after that shoot, I was invited to work with other directors. Everything grew from there.

You don't see many women like me in porn (or in mainstream media, for that matter). We are not entirely invisible, but, like other underrepresented identities, we've been confined to the mostly fetishized sub-genre of BBW (Big Beautiful Women) porn. BBW was coined in 1979 by Carole Shaw when she launched *BBW* magazine, a fashion and lifestyle magazine for plus-sized women.¹ Although BBW was adopted mainly by folks used to self-identify or declare their admiration for plus-sized women (as in personal ads on the Internet), it is now a widely used umbrella term that may have different connotations depending on the context. The adult industry uses it to describe porn that features bigger women. Some BBW porn is rooted in a celebration of our sexiness from adoration to explicitly fetishizing our size. But too much of it crosses into not so thinly veiled degradation and shame: titles like *Cash for Chunkers*, *All Ass No Face*, *Double Dipped Fatties*, and *Fat Cocksucking Whores* are meant to cast us as sexual freaks to be ogled and laughed at. And it's implied that viewers who like to watch us are freaks, too.

Although people describe me as a BBW performer, and I embrace the description as a kind of shorthand that industry folks understand, I don't perform in traditional BBW porn. Instead, I collaborate with my husband, as well as other directors whom I select carefully, and work on only the projects I want to. It's important for me to appear as a BBW performer in films that are not marketed as BBW movies. I want to leave behind a body of work that demonstrates my commitment to representing curvier women in a positive light, challenging society's norms of what is considered desirable, beautiful, and attractive. I know my performances strike a nerve in people, and I am pleased when they do. If

people don't like the image of a plus-sized woman enjoying her sexual self, my wish is that they ask themselves: Why? What about this turns you off?

I am a fat woman in control of her sexuality. I have worked hard on building my confidence over time; I want to inspire other women to do the same. We can be sexual, confident, and happy; this is my message.

I don't fit the stereotype of a typical porn performer in other ways as well. I'm not blond, tanned, or surgically altered. I am a fat Latina with pale skin, tattoos, and fire-engine-red hair. While I am not white, I'm sometimes read as white by others. Because I don't "look Latina" by porn's narrow standards, I'm not cast in "ethnic porn"—another fetishized sub-genre. "Ethnic porn" caters to a narrow-minded, misguided representation of minorities. By not participating in that type of porn, and focusing on a more nuanced identity, I hope to offer another view of who a Latina is.

I am an exhibitionist; I get a thrill from being watched. I have felt this way from an early age. I remember in my early high school days, I used to open the shades in my room just enough for the gardener to catch a glimpse of me getting dressed for school. Ever since then, the thought of being watched and desired has always turned me on, so I love performing for the camera and an audience. Perhaps it's the power I feel when I can evoke desire in someone. Just as I did after that very first photo shoot with Carlos, I feel empowered and euphoric after every shoot.

I feel very lucky that I have had the chance to explore and expand my own sexuality through my work in pornography. I have lived out my own fantasies by having sex on a stage with an audience watching me, and participating in a scene in the middle of the forest in front of a huge waterfall. I've been able to experience many scenarios—group sex, dominance and submission, sex with other women and transgender men and women. These opportunities have led me from identifying as a straight woman to understanding that my sexuality is fluid and not dictated by the gender of my partner. These powerful, consensual experiences took place in safe, controlled environments, and everything was fully discussed before the shoots.

Most often, I collaborate with Carlos. Our work is an ongoing statement of the change we would like to see in pornography. For example, we focus on casting a diverse range of performers encompassing various body types and ethnicities.

My work in pornography is not my primary form of income (I am a makeup artist, photographer, nonporn model), so I can pick and choose the projects I work on. I consider a lot of factors before I take a job: the

director, my fellow performer(s), the type of movie or project, and how much I will be paid. I have turned down many projects that I felt would not represent larger women favorably. I try hard to stay true to my goal of representing empowered, curvy women. But despite my best efforts, sometimes footage that I have previously shot for one movie ends up in another and I have no control over it. In one instance, my image was used for a movie I would never have agreed to be in. It was upsetting, but it is the reality of what can happen once you sign a release. I am fortunate because nearly all of the projects I have worked on have been with friends and people I admire. When I work with friends, we develop a rhythm and I can really understand the performance they want from me. When they push me as a performer, they also convey their trust that I'll be able to embody their vision, which helps me grow as an artist. It is a true collaborative effort.

In 2009, *Adult Video News* (AVN), the mainstream industry's trade magazine, published an article that called BBW performers "heifers" and said that BBW films were "allowing those too embarrassed to actually be seen with fat chicks the opportunity to jerk off to them in the privacy of their homes."² I wrote a response to the article and vented my frustrations with the writer's blatant disrespect for not only larger women but women in general. My response, which appeared on my blog, received a lot of attention and support, and AVN was bombarded with phone calls and letters from people who were just as outraged as I was.³ I had no idea that my blog would receive such a tidal wave of support from women of all sizes and men who adore plus-sized women. The massive reaction made it clear to AVN that there are plenty of people who think bigger girls are hot. Eight months later, I became the first BBW to appear on the cover of AVN.

I am also the first BBW to have a sex toy cast from my vagina. This fact gets mixed reactions. Some people see it as the ultimate form of objectification. I think the creation and success of the toy shows fans and companies that plenty of people desire plus-sized women, and that there is a valid market for products representing a broader spectrum of body types.

By far, the most rewarding part of my work has been the feedback I have received from women, men, and couples who find larger bodies attractive. Other plus-sized women tell me that my work has helped them to view themselves in a more positive light, allowing them to feel just as sexy as women half their size. One woman said that she was rarely intimate with her partner because she felt ugly and undesirable, but, after discovering my work, she was able to view herself differently. Many of

my female fans have never seen any of my movies. I think that just seeing an image of someone who looks like them, and embodies a positive sexual energy, does a lot to shift how women feel about themselves inside.

I hope to continue to produce work that I am proud of and that challenges me as a person, subject, and artist. To me, there are few more genuine or powerful forms of self-expression than a woman performing sex for others to watch. It is the ultimate statement of empowerment: a woman in control of what she wants to do with her own body, on her own terms. I believe exposing yourself on that level takes bravery and strength. We are exposing not only our naked bodies, but also our vulnerability and strength. We are expressing that we enjoy sex and that we are in control of our sexuality.

I now know that confidence and a positive outlook play a much more important role in attraction than the size of your body. My mission is to help other women understand that, too.

Notes

1. "BBW Past and Present," *BBW Magazine*, accessed February 25, 2012, http://bbwmagazine.com/pastandpresent_3.htm.

2. Nelson X, "The \$500 Stocking Guide: Fattening Up Sales," *Adult Video News*, April 2009, 82. Also online: accessed February 25, 2012, <http://www.mydigitalpublication.com/publication/index.php?i=14336&m=&l=&p=96&pre=&ver=swf>.

3. April Flores a.k.a. Fatty D, "Heifers, Bovines, and Baconators," *FattyD.com*, July 4, 2009, <http://fattyd.com/blog/2009/04/07/heifers-bovines-and-baconators/>.

The Power of My Vagina



BUCK ANGEL

Buck Angel was born female and survived a tumultuous and anguished youth to become the successful self-made man he is today. Parlaying the self-esteem and confidence he garnered through his sex change, he made history as the world's first female-to-male transsexual (FTM) porn star. In 2007, he became the first FTM to win the prestigious Transsexual Performer of the Year Award from AVN. Buck Angel is also a groundbreaking filmmaker who has produced a series of public service announcements on seldom discussed topics, and a unique pair of documentaries about trans men's sexualities, one for the mainstream, and the other for an adult audience. He's an entrepreneur who has gone from pioneering a new adult-industry niche, FTM porn, to appearing in mainstream media. More recently, he's become a motivational speaker, educating people about sexuality and gender, with a universal message of learning to love one's self.

My name is Buck Angel. I am a man. I have a vagina and I work in the sex industry.

From the moment we're born, our culture tells us that genitals determine gender and not all genitals are created equal: we are taught that having a vagina makes you weak. Many women grow up feeling like it is not okay to be sexually at peace with their vaginas. I certainly felt that way for many years. I had a very hard time with my vagina; I could not touch it or really look at it. I was ashamed of it—not so much because I was “female,” but more because I didn't like my vagina. It made me feel like I was less of a man.

Through my sex change and the use of testosterone, I became more sexually aware and my body became more sensitive. I felt compelled to explore my body in ways I hadn't before I transitioned from female to male. Then, one day while masturbating, I just slipped my fingers inside myself. What a powerful feeling to be able to have an orgasm with a part of my body I had never fully experienced before. Eventually, I became

comfortable engaging in penetration with a partner. I became so excited and positive about my vagina that I decided I wanted to share it with everyone!

I couldn't find any role models of guys like me in the porn world, so I decided to step up to the plate myself. When I first started my work in the adult industry, I wanted to represent myself as a transsexual man who was sexual and confident. I wanted to show that I could enjoy my vagina as a man, and that I didn't have to feel ashamed or disgusted. Porn isn't afraid of showing you everything, and I wasn't going to be either.

But when I first began, I had no idea that my work would ignite such a firestorm of controversy. The negativity and hate that my porn unleashed was primarily from biological men, I think perhaps because they are so attached to the idea that "the penis makes the man." But some women and trans men also spewed hate and venom at me. Some said that sexually explicit films are degrading, especially toward women. Plenty of trans men were horrified that I showed the world that there are men like me out there. They were concerned that I was trying to represent all trans men, and make everyone think that all trans men enjoy their vaginas and use them in the same way.

My intention was only to represent myself, and to show that I took pride in myself and my vagina—to demonstrate that I wasn't any less of a man because I enjoy being penetrated (by both men and women). To be able to experience sexual gratification from my vagina on film has been hugely liberating and empowering. It has provided me with even more self-confidence, along with a great deal of pleasure.

Some trans guys contacted me to thank me. Before seeing my porn, they didn't feel comfortable with their bodies, and they thought they would have to get a penis to be a "complete man." Many of these guys denied themselves sex because they were unable to enjoy the bodies that they—and the majority of trans men—have. (The surgery to create a penis is very expensive, risky, often unsuccessful, and, in my opinion, lacking in aesthetics and function.) They saw me as a man, having sex, using my vagina, and receiving great pleasure.

Obviously, the barrage of hate has upset me, but the positive feedback made me realize that I do not make pornography simply for people to get off. I do educational work, too. I challenge people to examine how our society defines gender on the basis of genitals alone. I change the way they look at what it means to be a man. I promote the idea that having a vagina is powerful, no matter who it is attached to. I inspire many trans men who have vaginas to feel safe to explore and enjoy sex. I show the public that guys like us exist and that we are sexy and sexual. My latest

projects are educational and include interviews with different trans men about their sex changes, and how their sexuality has transformed along with their gender and their bodies. I want to provide trans men with a voice—and for more of us to speak loudly and be heard.

When men do adult work they are considered “studs.” There is no reason that it should be any different when women do the same work. This double standard of sex work is appalling. I have chosen this line of work not because (as the stereotype about women with vaginas goes) I am abused, coerced, or incapable of doing something else. I make porn because I am passionate about educating about sex and gender. The message of being *empowered* through sex work is a very important one.

To use the word “vagina” in my life now makes me feel like Superman. I see that other trans men are starting to feel the same way. We no longer have to feel like that word makes us weaker, but that we can own and use it to feel and express our personal power. I believe that making my films has helped to open doors for people (no matter their gender) who have always felt some sort of shame about their bodies, or dissociation from them. That’s my kind of feminism: taking control of our bodies, naming them on our terms, and being unafraid of using our power, especially sexually. Taking back the word “vagina,” using it as a symbol of power, and showing it on film has changed my life. In turn, by being so open and public about that, I have also changed the world.

Bound by Expectation: The Racialized Sexuality of Porn Star Keni Styles



CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU

Celine Parreñas Shimizu works as a filmmaker and film scholar and is professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her first book, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American on Screen and Scene* won the Cultural Studies Book Award from the Association for Asian American Studies in 2009, and her second book is *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*. Recently, her first feature film, *Birthingright: Mothering Across Difference*, won the Best Feature Documentary at the Big Mini DV Festival. She teaches popular culture, social theories of power and inequality, race and sexuality, and film and performance theory and production. She is currently at work on her new film, *Stoop Labor*. For more, see www.celineshimizu.com.

In the now classic 1989 essay “Looking For My Penis,” Richard Fung identifies the predominance of Asian men performing as bottoms in gay porn.¹ While critic/filmmaker Hoang Tan Nguyen’s work critiques the rendering of the bottom as undesirable, as if lacking power,² Richard Fung’s work captures a critique that I call “straitjacket sexuality” which I define in my recent book as constrained definitions of sex that privilege norms and limit our understanding of the diversities of sexuality. That is, when Fung critiques the lack of a wide range of representations for Asian men in western pornography, his point shows us how such a limited scope acts like a chokehold on the sexual possibilities available to Asian men not only in pornographic imagery, but on the horizon of representations we can further imagine. Aggravating the problem of limited Asian male representations in pornography, antipornography scholars like Melissa Farley present the representations of racialized subjects as the ultimate manifestation of pornography’s victimizing power.³ Supposedly, the kind of sex scenes featuring people of color in pornography damages and destroys subjects already assaulted by racial inequality

in scenes of everyday life. Unlike Farley's logics that simply declare the racism of pornography as matter-of-fact, Fung's writing and video work describe how pornography and explicit representations can illuminate ongoing struggles around racialized sexualities. His work *Steam Clean* (1990) educates and humanizes, especially in times like the 1980s and 90s, the AIDS crisis. And in *Orientations* (1986) and *Chinese Characters* (1990) the method of multiple perspectives is crucial in representing a wide range of identities under the categories of queer and Asian. He makes sure to represent a number of characters so that each presents a network of identities who define themselves from multiple angles. His method ensures how specific members of Asian American gay, lesbian, transgender, or queer communities disseminate the diversity of their desires, practices, and identities. Using open-ended questions, Fung's subjects not only speak for themselves in describing their sexual experiences, but understand and theorize their particular actions and their significance for themselves and in relation to others.

Pornography, like other media technologies, can be deployed by people of color to represent themselves as sexual subjects—who can own their desires and learn something about themselves. Rather than defining sexual representations as manifestations of racism, filmmakers of color like Fung do so within a framework of subjects-in-struggle, who engage sexuality as a process while making their own images. That is, they use media in an attempt to understand their sexualities within and against imposed definitions and established ideas about their racial identities. To use Michel Foucault's words, "how people actually conceive themselves and their sexual behavior" is what we see carefully set up and drawn out in methods that don't already assume the meanings of racialized sexuality.⁴

Taking Richard Fung's approach—the power of talking through one's representations to make sense of one's struggles with sexuality and race, I evaluate the impact of Keni Styles, widely regarded as the first Asian heterosexual male performer in the US pornography industry. He has received more than a dozen award nominations (including Male Performer of the Year in 2011 by AVN and the Urban X Awards) and won Best Male Newcomer at the UK Adult Film Awards in 2006 and Male Acting Performance of the Year at the XBIZ Awards in 2011, which illustrates not only Keni Styles's popularity, but his ability to cross geographic borders. Fascinating about Keni Styles is a Thai and British masculinity or an Asian masculinity that is forged within multiple western contexts, including the United States where he works. I keep this in mind as I look

at how racialized sexuality is configured in his own narrative and how his racialized sexuality is conveyed in feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino's *Rough Sex #3: Adrianna's Dangerous Mind* (2011), in a group sex scene nominated for an Adult Video News award.

As the first Asian heterosexual porn star in western pornography, Keni Styles may embody the missing penis, whose search was called for by Richard Fung. After establishing himself in the US porn industry, Styles embarked upon a business of helping other men through an instructional video: his self-representation arrives not in the form of directing his own narrative pornographic work but as a how-to pornographic video called *Superman Stamina* (2011). The product purports to help alleviate men's problems with premature ejaculation by making available the philosophies and sexual practices of porn stars. With an approach that presumably addresses both the mind and body, Styles promises to provide an education that will change lives through better sex. In close readings of the marketing of the product, I note that he uses his racial background and experiences, in terms of his racialization by others, as linked to premature ejaculation. In effect, his sexual problems are racial problems. Considering his position as the first Asian male heterosexual porn star, what does it mean for one who is a member of a group usually seen as lacking in sexual power, especially in the movies, to offer a solution to the problem of lack? In the process, does he offer an alternative masculinity to the one that judges Asian American men as inadequate? I am especially intrigued at the possibility of his showing us not only how to find your penis but what new discourses of masculinity he generates, if any. I then compare his how-to pornographic video to the feminist porn work of Tristan Taormino. Bringing together these two works will help me assess the significance of Keni Styles whose pornography teaches us about the potentialities of telling stories about race and sex today.

A Male Version of "Me Love You Long Time!": Marketing Keni Styles in *Superman Stamina*

On thesuperstamina.com, Keni Styles's *Superman Stamina* video offers for sale a video that shares the secrets of male porn stars to solve the often shameful and frustrating problems with premature ejaculation. In identifying the need for his product, Styles presents a definition of manhood that centers on women's pleasure and that clearly relies on a range of techniques for sexually pleasing a woman successfully. In a four-part

system, he outlines the need for penetration to ensure a woman's orgasm. He argues that "oral [sex] is not enough" and prescribes penetrative sex as the "biologically programmed" solution. In prioritizing the penis itself as essential to a woman's pleasure in the sexual exchange, he asserts that the woman needs a man [that is, a penis] inside of her. Styles argues that the woman does not just love but actually "needs" orgasms. This need is motivated by a reproductive charge. When reaching orgasm, she releases a chemical that supposedly "allows for her to identify a good mate." So when more is released, she is "more likely to think of you as the one; while not enough time means the brain is not flooded with the chemical long enough to register." The male challenge, then, according to Keni Styles, is to penetrate the woman "long enough" in a "firm and steady" manner so that she forges an attachment. In effect, Styles produces this structure of pleasure that follows pornography's problem of how to make female pleasure as visible as male pleasure. But beyond this pursuit of showing female pleasure, Styles ultimately defines the significance of sexual success as male prowess.

In the premise of the video, a definition of manhood emerges that says men must demonstrate ability and skill, even expertise, so as to please women. And this demonstration of a unique male dexterity produces male power. The point of learning these techniques benefits men and renders women as derivative in the male context of prowess. Thus, to use the penis proficiently and even well, can mean access to the phallus—where women are begging men for sex and moreover, as the video suggests, will forego the social rituals of receiving gifts and being taken out to dinner, just to experience the pleasures of male penetration.

In marketing *Superman Stamina*, Styles narrates how he was born of a Thai woman, a sex worker. He then grew up in an orphanage in London as the "only Asian male," where he was "made fun of and pushed around by others." They taunted his "eyes, skin, and penis size—though they did not see it." This teasing shaped his self-regard, for "he came to recognize [that] Asian men are not stallions in bed." The naming by others led to the experience of premature ejaculation as an adult. There was "not much I could do—I came, not [by way of] penetration, but in my pants." In his intimate relations with others, the "hotter the girl" the easier he "lost it." This inability to perform sexually shaped his social relations with women; when he became nervous about sex he would simply "stop flirting." Here, his intimacy issues lead to a kind of social stunting when he cannot sexually interact with women.

Recognizing the problem as bodily in nature, Styles built up his athleticism through boxing so as "to get confidence [and] work out anxiety

. . . [and become] a champion”; he looked “tough” but “inside held a secret.” He was a “bad ass in the ring” while in bed it was “another story.” Despite his strong body, he was “dumped on (sic) for someone else” when his “good oral sex [skills] of G-spot tongue twirls” were cataloged as dissatisfying to his partner. Pills did not help either, as it simply made him a “two-pump chump” who’s quick to rise and quick to fall. He did gain the appearance of strength and thus fulfilled a definition of maleness in terms of his body, but his body failed in the face of the other, especially in sexual intimacy. Lost, he joined the British Army and somehow and quite unexpectedly found a solution to his sexual problems there.

In telling his experiences at boot camp in the British Army, Styles again narrates a racialized story of manhood. He was the “only Asian guy in the platoon and the small dick jokes came fast.” His racialization, as a weak man who must be tested and bullied even by those who hold official authority over him, resonates with recent cases in the US military. Indicating the circulation of social meaning regarding Asian American men in the national imaginary, Private Danny Chen faced relentless racial bullying in the military that led to his death.⁵ In Keni Styles’s case, a drill sergeant tormented him with particular attention and special tortures every morning. The sergeant “punished him with intensive training, running in place with high knees; push ups; sit-ups; squats; and burpees.” Styles transformed his physical experience into a test of mental endurance. He built his threshold of pain by using what he called “mental preparation” and “body control” that helped him tolerate pain longer and longer every time. He enacts bodily exercises as mental exercises: to breathe against his “stomach’s churning,” to focus on preventing vomiting, and to keep going despite his “lungs on fire.” The coming together of mind and body composed what he calls a “victory [that] changed my life.” He says “body control” essentially transforms to “manhood control” when honing one’s ability to focus.

This triumph of mental exercise is a turning into oneself that is gauged through the entirely social phenomenon of recognition from another. When the sergeant saw that “he could not break me,” their relations changed. A “new feeling” and a “new confidence” strengthened and changed Styles. No longer caught by the inability to control his own body, he achieves a neutral state, one of masterful control, as that which “cracks the code to porn star stamina.”

Keni Styles thus uses his racialization as an Asian man to show his triumph in a realm where rarely an Asian heterosexual man is found: pornography and even stardom. In *Superman Stamina*, the mental preparation and the physical strength came together to create a technique he

wishes to sell. In an American context, he uses the positioning of Asian men in the racial hierarchy of sex to say it's possible to achieve what is most unexpected: porn stardom.

Mobilizing the established discourse of Asian American male sexual failure, Keni Styles animates his Superman Stamina program. Subsequently, his discussions of sexual success are not racialized but gendered. Successful manhood is achieved by sexual prowess. He begins by satisfying the needs of one woman. In trying out different positions with more women, he tests his self-control, and discovers his ability to "last even longer," thirty to forty-five minutes rather than the initial seven minutes. Moreover, he was "the one deciding when" to cum thereby mastering his own body rather than being mastered by it. The woman's pleasure is not so much about the proof of his skills, but an acknowledgment of his power when "giving it to a girl" and in return hearing her "screaming [his] name and squirting all over [his] cock."

The intimate site in which he succeeds establishes a new presence in the social world. He not only meets more women but palpably feels their desire for him as "the one guy in the room who could rock them in the bedroom." He asserts his identity as a "stallion" and how "women sense it." And how he enjoys that women "love to talk" so that others hear about his "superman stamina" and want to "find out for themselves." The ultimate form of recognition for him, however, is when the most desirable, super hot and "drop-dead gorgeous" woman validates his sexual and thus social power. If we assert the Asian American context of the desexualized Asian man coming into sexual power, we can see that it is the desirable woman's gaze that affirms and validates him so much that he can profit from it—in the form of packaging a solution to manhood problems. In this way, the penis becomes an agent for the phallus, for a more traditional, constricted definition of manhood that emphasizes sexual prowess over legions of women as conquest, and heroism in the eyes of men, as we will see in the next example.

Styles's new swagger gains the notice of his best friend Nolan, who complains about having to take his girlfriend out to a nice dinner and buy her a present in exchange for sex. Using the Superman Stamina techniques, Nolan's usual thirty seconds of foreplay lead to his girlfriend's eyes "opened wide with mouth frozen like she's seen a ghost, [and] then cries, convulsing and screaming and shaking for five minutes." To Nolan's shock, she declares that she's just had her "first orgasm [ever]!" So, the triumph becomes a gaining of power for men, enabling women to achieve pleasure. Nolan no longer has to bribe his girlfriend for sex, she's "begging" for it, and without "fancy presents." Styles takes credit for

“saving their relationship!” and establishing a gender order that liberates women into the realm of heteroexual pleasure. In this new post-Superman Stamina-powered world, we can map a gender order for men as possessing the phallus that women worship as a gift.

Superman Stamina is sold as a way to gain “unfair advantage over other” men, for it enables “staying hard as long as you want; [having] sex wherever and as many times, and more than one time per night.” This ability presumably enables men to “pick up confidence” in a social world that values manhood as the ability to provide sexual pleasure for and preside with sexual power over women, who are having “multiple orgasms,” as a method of control by men.

According to Keni Styles, other male porn stars will get mad at him for “releasing their secrets.” A long way away from the racialization of weak Asian men that began his story, Styles suddenly raises the specter of that “young guy in Thailand” who is like “lots of other guys” who wish to “give women the most intense toe-curling orgasms” by offering his “tell-all course.” His project is to transform a weak Asian man into one who is strong. He professes to help others “eliminate premature ejaculation in days” with the “closely guarded secrets of porn stars! Crack the code, learn in minutes and use tonight” the ways of endurance and time that essentially beat “size” and “tricks.” He promises you’ll “last fifteen minutes or it’s free!” Finally, in returning to marketing the racialization of Asian male sexuality, Styles counts on the narrative of overcoming weakness as the one that can sell and make convincing his *Superman Stamina*.

In this mediated self-representation, or the use of one’s otherness to sell a self that wields power that can be made accessible to others, an alternative manhood emerges in popular culture. Indeed, he forms a kind of macho sex that is itself very giving, especially to one’s partner. In *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), when Vietnamese prostitute Papillon Soo Soo uttered the lines “Me love you long time!” she promised a sexual experience that prioritized serving the white man, while also threatening an attachment with no end, like the self-sacrificing Asian woman who does not know how to stop loving him.⁶ The endurance Keni Styles’s *Superman Stamina* aspires to is the possibility of gaining access to a manhood that pleases women in order to gain male power but also to offer new possibilities for male relations with women. His story of disprized manhood leads to a liberation from this position, through sexual expertise that enables new relations. He formulates both a conscientious and aggressive sexuality that attends to the pleasures of women and the opening of new racialized manhoods through generosity in sex.

**Keni Styles in Feminist Porn: Tristan Taormino's
Rough Sex 3: Adrianna's Dangerous Mind (2011)**

In Tristan Taormino's series *Rough Sex*, each sex scene starts with an interview with the actors before their performances. While the interview format is standard to gonzo porn, Tristan Taormino is unique in her ability to center the subject position of the female actor within a feminist frame. That is, unlike gonzo porn where filmmakers like Ed Powers use the interview as part of the sex scene,⁷ Tristan Taormino truly breaks down the fourth wall, with actors who provide their own interpretations. Essentially, she asks each actor to theorize their understanding of power in the sex act, specifically in terms of "rough sex." In doing so, we engage the meanings of power, strength, and consciousness around the consent of the other, especially gendered power relations.

Foremost in the interviews is the woman as the center of reference, in terms of articulating her desires, fantasies, and imaginings. The actors discuss their relationship to her and especially their role in fulfilling her wishes for pleasure. The star Adrianna's female partners also address sex and gender themes, such as what it means for a woman to participate in rough sex with another. Indeed, the thematic that speaks to Taormino's commitment to an ethical feminist filmmaking is the exploration of gendered power relations in the sex act. We see how women experience pleasure from scenes that may look like degradation but are actually enactments that explore precisely what it means to confront power and power relations.

In *Rough Sex*, consent is crucial in the production of these scenes. Beyond consent, the filmmaker fashions an ethical and responsible relationship to her actors. The filmmaker carefully listens to her subjects, especially the female performer, for it is she who determines the parameters of the scenes. The star articulates her desire for acts that may be considered perverse and taboo and Taormino attends to the concrete structure for enacting these female fantasies without judging what composes it. Instead, she respects the actor so as to free her to articulate what she desires. The ultimate ethical moment is Taormino's commitment to what Michel Foucault distinguishes as the importance of highlighting the freedom of sexual choices, rather than the freedom of sexual acts.⁸ The sex acts in Taormino's films are consensual, which is literally acknowledged in her opening credits. There is no mystery to this agreement between the actors, filmmakers, and thus, the spectators.

Prior to the "jock" sex scene in *Rough Sex #3* featuring Keni Styles, Adrianna appears for an interview set in the actual locker room where

her sexual fantasy of group “sex in the co-ed shower . . . with hot guys who go to the gym” occurs. Intercut with Adrianna, Keni Styles acknowledges the anonymity of the sex as constructed in the scene. Discussing his character, he is conscious of the factor of never seeing his sex partner again. Then Adrianna describes Nat, her first partner, as one with a “beautiful face, smile, and eyes”—and whom she really likes. We then cut to Nat, with the beautiful face, smile, and eyes, who says he “likes fucking her because she like[s] to fuck.” It is notable that in the pre-scene interviews, no one mentions the meanings and roles of any racial differences in the sex scene they perform, though the “jock” scene is composed of the blonde white woman Adrianna, the larger black man named Nat, one smaller white man named Danny, a smaller Asian man Keni, and another large man, Evan, who is white. Instead, the actors describe each other’s personalities and individual features in a kind of color-blind telling that eschews racial difference as a factor that charges the group sex scene.

What are the implications of not discussing racial difference in the construction of the sex scenes, whether positively in its ability to arouse and excite, or negatively in terms of ascriptions of perversity? Would part of the titillation involve racial difference as it is portrayed in the white woman’s fantasy of having sex with uniformly fit but racially different men? Can desire involve seeing difference and exploring interest in each other’s differences? Evan shares that what is unique about Adrianna is how she “enjoys what she’s doing, so it’s easy work there.” He describes how she “looks at you and engages you the whole time.” I argue that the look functions to address the continuing struggles of race and sexuality as they are confronted, though left unspoken, in the scene.

Adrianna introduces Keni Styles this way: “Oh, he’s a nice man,” while he describes her with much more specificity. In his cool style and calm demeanor, Keni articulates how, “She loves sex and makes you feel like you possess the last cock in the world and she is the luckiest woman to get it.” Next to him, Danny nods his head in approval. Keni’s charming and spirited speech is short but important. We note that he is British though Asian, and even this difference is unmentioned though surely part of his appeal. We then move to Evan whom Adrianna calls her “porn boyfriend.” He describes how she “has fun with sex, as someone in tune with her body.” Even though no mention of racial difference arises, even to mention that this is a truly interesting and a very currently new configuration of a multiracial cast, the actors register as conscious of the gendered dynamics of sex and power, but also clearly consenting to the sexual activity as worth shooting and seeing.

The politics of consent, especially in terms of gendered differences in physical strength, clearly emerges in the rich discussions between the porn actors. With a gleam in her eyes, Adrianna shares how she likes when “guys get rough with me,” for “it’s like fireworks!” All of the men describe how they do not initiate their sexual encounters with roughness—Keni, for example, says he likes to react and follow her lead, as if to measure what she prefers. All three other actors respond similarly when they say: “I don’t initiate [rough sex], unless the girl likes it,” or as Nat says, “It’s not what I will initiate, but if she asks for it, I enjoy it.” Danny Wyldé says he does not “want to inflict harm or damage someone’s skin.” He describes possessing a “consciousness” about pain. “When it comes to rough sex,” he says, he prefers it as “part of the sex and not an activity to do outside of it.” In the thematic addressed in this conversation, acknowledgment of gender arises much more clearly than racial difference.

I offer a racial reading, however, for it is clearly part of the action, specifically in what transpires between them in the “face-to-face.” Using Emmanuel Levinas and his conception of the face as a site of “infinity” or a mystery that can never be solved even as we gain knowledge of its nuances, I identify the agency of the face so as to point to the relationality between the sexual partners. All the actors except Keni Styles establish a face-to-face connection with Adrianna. This difference, I argue, illustrates the burden of representation he shoulders in representing Asian men and also successfully shows that racial otherness persists for Asians in pornography, even in feminist porn. Because he is caught in what I call a bind of expectation as an Asian straight male porn star, his possibilities are limited. A challenge emerges: while the subjectivity of the woman is centered, the differences between men arise to remind us of the multiple complexities of power in sexual scenes where race is a dynamic struggle of subjectivities still in process.

The scene begins. A big, muscular, dark-skinned black man named Nat stands in front of his open locker, mostly naked. Adrianna walks in, presumably looking for the showers. Dressed in short shorts and a thin, see-through t-shirt, her blond hair falls in two braids framing her face. The look she fashions registers as a trope she performs: that of the young white girl with an innocent allure. He smiles, his friendly face open to her. She walks towards him. He calmly looks her up and down, informs her that she is in the men’s locker room while touching and turning her so he can see her body, as if through the clothes. He moves her shorts to reveal her butt. He looks her in the eyes and says he knows that she is “looking for something else.” She meets him with a look that is power-

fully direct and desirously big-eyed. Her whole face opens to express a longing for him too. In this look of mutual desire, they kiss and immediately entangle. He pats her bottom and says she will “be here for a while now.” And she agrees that this is what she “really came in here for.” They have a prolonged exchange on the locker room bench where each stimulates the other. She bends over, he eats her ass. She sits and rides him, smiling. There is an exchange of subjectivity that transpires between them, and it is through their eyes. While she masturbates, her eyes seek his to make a link. Their acts reveal how touch generates pleasure, and their eyes affirm it in their exchanged glances as she becomes wild, most apparent in her face and the disheveled strands of hair. She will continue looking to him even as positions change. Increasingly, they sweat and he is particularly drenched. His face spills with small streams of wetness. When he bends her over in the shower, he pulls her hair, so her face faces him. Then she bends her arm behind her, and turns to share a frenzied look. They both grit their teeth, exposing the force they expend upon each other. The interviews were right: indeed, Adrianna engages them eye-to-eye in what may be the most distinguishing element of the sex scene.

Unlike the exploitative and caricatured representations of black men in pornography discussed by Gail Dines, the sexual interaction between Nat and Adrianna differs significantly.⁹ They engage each other eye-to-eye and face-to-face in terms of a mutually pleasurable experience. However, we also have a privileging of the black male and white female encounter as the primary sexual relation. It garners the most time and focus, as well as comes first. The white woman and the Asian man enjoy the least time together, revealing that a certain politics of race exists and persists in this work.

While Nat and Arianna are bent over and leaning on the tile barrier to the shower, Keni and Danny walk in, dressed in boxing shorts with gloves in their hands. It is Adrianna’s face, in this naked state, that the two boxers see when they walk into the locker room. The expression on her face can be described as one so uncovered and exposed in its sexually provoked pleasure that its look reaches out to them like an invitation. Nat and Adrianna disentangle and he walks out of the locker room. She lies on the bench alone, as the boxers, two smaller men, stand over her, placing their penises close to her face as they take off their jockstraps.

An interview with the actors cuts into the scene to remind us of its construction as a fantasy. Danny Wylde says, “This would not happen in real life. If I walked in to that, and I did not know her, I would start laughing really hard. I don’t know if I would join in.” Keni Styles says he

“gets off visually.” And the director’s off-camera voice affirms, “you like to watch.” Adrianna says that seeing a man “standing on the side, jerking off is super hot.”

Returning to the scene, Keni pulls Adrianna into the shower and she spends equal time pleasing both actors by holding their cocks in her mouth or with her hands. Danny, the white actor, penetrates her first. He leans her leg up against the wall and spansks her. As they fuck, Keni moves away from the scene while stimulating himself. In the context of a historical representation that centers white men and puts in the periphery Asian men, as I argue in *Straitjacket Sexualities*,¹⁰ the meaning of Keni’s derivative role in this scene is part of a cinematic tradition much larger and longer than pornography. She looks for him, reaches for him on the side of the screen. The white man expresses a kind of overwhelming by her in his frequent “Oh my god” murmurings. She becomes wild with him as she leans her head back on the ground, and he almost tears at her breasts as she opens her legs. He moves, telling her to sit on his cock as he lies flat on the shower floor.

We think Keni Styles is no longer in the scene, but he appears again. This time, he sits on the ground, against the wall, masturbating with his legs splayed out. The scene unfolds like real time, as if to capture how arousal takes time. Danny and Adrianna move from grunts of pleasure to laughter. They share several intense face-to-face encounters that include kissing, laughter, or expressions of abandon. Keni disappears again, and in doing so makes apparent the face-to-face connection that he lacks in his relations with her. Danny kisses Adrianna as they face each other, even as he enters her from behind. Her eyes open super wide. While their speech is meant primarily for each other as the filmmaker does not use a microphone to broadcast their whispers, Danny states that “you deserve my cum in your face” to which she readily acquiesces. After the money shot, the calm is interrupted by Keni Styles, who rushes in to stand over her, showing himself as already erect.

The sex scene with Keni and Adrianna lasts one minute. He lies down on the ground and momentarily fucks her. He straddles her almost like they are a pair of scissors, with both their heads on opposite sides. He then moves her, pulls her hair to expose her face away from him, so she still does not face him. He soon cums all over her face and puts his penis over her mouth to catch his drip as she kneels before him. Notable here is the brevity of the Asian man’s sexual encounter and the lack of a face-to-face connection with the woman while the two other men who precede him, one black and one white, and even the one after, enjoy a much longer encounter with her, with an extended eye-to-eye and face-

to-face connection. We can read this scene of Keni as the “one-minute man” as evidence of the derivative status of Asian men in pornography, in relation to black and white men especially in the context of *Superman Stamina*. But his inability here and now could be for many reasons, including the pressures of performing as *the* Asian heterosexual penis in porn.

The last sexual pairing in this group scene plays differently as well. An actual conversation transpires. After Keni leaves, Adrianna leans back against the shower wall, with cum on her face and hair. The camera pans to reveal Evan under the shower, looking at her. He casually asks a rhetorical question, “Rough day in the gym?” And she retorts, “I’m not done working out,” which serves as an invitation for deepening their encounter to include his cleaning her up and her having more sex. Like the white Danny and the black Nat, this white man Evan connects with the white woman at the level of the face and in conversation. They look at each other and pay attention to what the other says, developing a repartee about the fantasy itself, even as he helps to fulfill it.

In the context of the three other sex scenes in “Jock,” how do we evaluate the work of Keni Styles, especially concerning the brevity of the Asian male/white female sex scene? We can interpret this in many ways including the use of race and the visibility of racial difference as a lens of analysis. And it is an important revelation, for pornography is not a site where racial politics disappear. It reveals how inequalities exist, whether in the form of screen time or in the intensity of the sex scene. Or we can forego a racial reading and say that Keni Styles was just not that into her. In *Rough Sex*, the female actor chooses her partners and defines the bounds of her scenes. In this context, we may produce the nonracial reading of their lack of chemistry, his lack of attraction, or even hers. This was also essentially the only real group scene in the “Jock” program. A nonracial reading is productive indeed, but such a reader would ignore the intensity of the connection between Adrianna and her sexual partners, except for Keni—whom she did choose! In this way, race functions in such an unwieldy yet revealing manner in understanding what transpires in this scene.

My criteria of the face-to-face in measuring the sex acts, do not intend to contain how feminist porn aims to introduce and widen new pleasures in all of its myriad forms. However, I note the lack of face-to-face as a crucial way to measure the lack of Asian male subjectivity, and not just the penis, in pornography. Adrianna’s face-to-face connection with three of the men ensures an intensity that livens the scene and shows in brief moments the distance occupied by Asian men in relation

to white women. Emmanuel Levinas discusses eros not as “possession and power” of another, but as a kind of communication between selves that is “neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relations. It is the relationship with alterity, with mystery, that is, with the future.”¹¹ Here, Levinas privileges erotic relations as a site where we may understand our relationships with others; even in our most intimate relations, where he argues that we are alone. His is a larger understanding of the self as alone. And in privileging the face as the agent of bare emotion, the lack of face-to-face connotes a kind of disappearance. Does alone then encompass the way in which Keni Styles disappeared from the sex, and when he returns, performs for only one minute, defying his promise of knowing how to last?

Is isolation a choice for Keni Styles who moves in and out of the frame when Adrianna is with the other man? It is important to emphasize the agency of the actor here for he is the one to step away from the scene. In the first instance of their *ménage à trois*, a kind of equal opportunity sexual exchange transpires, but at the crucial moment, he leaves. He literally steps away from the frame even if he continues to be welcome in the scene. Adrianna would welcome his continued presence as evidenced by her reaching for him to return. In the interviews, Danny discusses the hotness of seeing another man and woman together when he himself steps aside from the group scenes. Sex here can be lonely in the sense of the burden of expectation that Keni Styles may feel as the sole Asian man in the scene and in the larger industry of pornography. Or there may be the fact of having to step aside because the white man penetrates her first so he has to move away. Or once again, it may not seem appealing for him to stay. He does linger, masturbating. Their faces remain focused on the extraction and giving of pleasure. And he reaches for her and stimulates her as she gives Danny oral sex. Does Keni’s stepping aside render him as accepting of a kind of racial hierarchy? I don’t think this is the only option.

If we were to accept the argument, we can see the aloneness of the characters even in the entanglements of sex; we can also interpret his moving away as an indication of his alienation—whether as a European, or an Asian who finds it important not to acknowledge one’s race, even if it is very apparent. What comforts and familiarities are conveyed in the white and black pairings with the white woman? Is Keni not privy to such familiarity? To be clear, there lacks a tradition of representation for the pairing of white women and Asian men in porn. If Nat’s scene differs from the tradition of exploitative sex between black men and white women, is Keni producing tradition every time he performs?

And how about the viewer? Dark-skinned Keni with the British accent and the small, fit body—how does he fit into the repertoire of bodies we are accustomed to seeing? These questions, when raised, validate the continuing dynamics that inform our perceptions of racial difference that still persist today—as evidenced in the singular stature of Keni Styles as the most prominent, if not only, Asian male actor in American heterosexual pornography, who most certainly faces a bind not only of representation, but of expectation. If we were to follow Richard Fung's method here, we would have more diversity and more representation. More numbers would certainly ease the burden of representing entire groups of people. Keni Styles's performance in this scene is not the failure of all Asian men, but produces the problem not only of representation but expectation.

In a stylistic nod to cinema's ability to provide doors and windows to existence, looking at the faces of the actors in the pleasures of sex and throes of orgasm, can we also open the doors and windows to the racial meanings of intimate relations? Ultimately, we can see that feminist porn prioritizes the subjectivity of women. In their relations with multiracial casts of men, how do the meanings of race change? And in the declaration of feminist porn's commitment to representing diversity, how do they capture ongoing struggles with race and racial difference in sexual relations? Can they help us indicate the racial politics of sexual pleasure? And how can an ethical filmmaking accommodate the dramas not only of gender but also race?

In closing, we discover then that feminist porn is not a utopian site for representations of race. In the process of innovating pornography, which it does through centering the complex subjectivities of women such as in the method of interview in Tristan Taormino's *Rough Sex*, feminist pornography shows the limits of racial representation and specifically the burden of expectation that Styles has to bear. We see the racial hierarchies unaddressed in Adriana's discussion of her fantasy. We see racialized dynamics unfold even if they are unspoken. Verbally, race is not there in her descriptions of the black man's "nice face, smile, and eyes," or in his description of how much she "loves sex." Whether racial difference is discussed or not discussed, meanings can and should be drawn. Studying the work and presence of Keni Styles can make sense of the process of racialization persisting even in feminist porn. In *Superman Stamina* he defines manhood with investments in redefining male power as giving. And in *Rough Sex #3: Adrianna's Dangerous Mind*, a one-minute performance can reinscribe Asian men into a manhood still so lacking—if we read the scene in a straitjacketed lens. In both, Keni

Styles's performances exceed the assessments of victimization of racial subjects in antifeminist porn. Each of these examples shows an uneasy relationship to heteronormative manhood. Such a finding challenges us working in feminist porn to continue to find ways to talk about the role of race in pornography. Through examining the work of Keni Styles in both *Superman Stamina* and *Rough Sex #3*, what we actually learn is that he carries an unfair burden of expectation. We also learn that any blanket assessment of racism at work in pornography does not capture the fraught and promising possibilities of seeing racial subjects struggling with the power and politics of sexuality in pornography.

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Notes

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Knowing Dick: Penetration and the Pleasures of Feminist Porn's Trans Men



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Bobby Noble is an associate professor at York University in Toronto, Canada, cross-appointed to the departments of English and sexuality studies. His research focuses on transgender scholarship, masculinity studies, and feminist porn studies from within cultural studies. He is the author of two monographs: *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* and *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions*.

The work done in this essay draws on the newly launched Feminist Porn Archive and Research Project. This is a federally funded, three-year Canadian research study of feminist-porn cultures and the creation of an archive that will house feminist porn. While there has been much contention in feminism about porn, feminist porn itself emerges in the latter decades of the twentieth century as both a product of and intervention in many of those debates. Feminist porn production and consumption has not only placed women's sexual pleasure within its domain but also reconfigured the sexuality of trans masculinity within its counterpublics. This essay takes these complexly gendered pleasures as part of its twofold focus. First it analyzes feminist porn as an archive of knowledge—that is, it argues that feminist porn is itself a methodology of knowledge production and of knowing that troubles the classificatory process that locked up pornography in the secret museum, an imaginary place of danger, as Walter Kendrick suggests, to which some have access and from which others (usually women and children) must be protected.¹ Kendrick argues that pornography is less a thing and more an idea or “thought structure,” a collection of processes focused on objects that have little in common with each other but that become rendered recognizable by virtue of classificatory, discursive, and definitional practices. This project also asks to what extent feminist pornography significantly contests or troubles an idea of pornography, sexuality, and gender

advocated by feminist fundamentalism. By fundamentalism, I refer to a series of feminist practices which, in their effect, oddly affiliate and align with social, moral, and biologically coercive normalizations.

The way that feminist porn troubles masculinity is the second domain of this essay: If feminist porn cultures can be theorized not just through methodological work but *as* methodological work, how does this change what can be known—and known differently—not just of women in porn, but its more elusive and silent subject supposedly in plain view, that of masculinities in porn? This essay asks: how are trans masculine bodies depicted and made knowable? Trans, butch, and FTM bodies become extremely significant hinge points within the complex nexus of feminist porn and its masculinities. Recent portrayals of FTM trans masculinities deploy a counterpublic and potentially post-porn practice I call *transing*. These representations have *transed*, or deterritorialized both masculinities and porn from the heteronormative male phallic body and the visual spectacle of the money shot. They produce the dispersal of pleasure across denaturalized bodies of desire and sites of gendered pleasure in performance, production, and consumption. To discern these deterritorializations, I first analyze the very ambivalent accounts of masculinity in the work of one antiporn feminist, Robert Jensen.² I then compare these accounts with two different depictions of FTM sexual cultures. The first is the documentary film by Debra A. Wilson, *The Butch Mystique*.³ Two other examples of feminist docu-porn will be analyzed: *Linda/Les and Annie* by Annie Sprinke; and Luke Woodward's *Enough Man*, to suggest that *trans-formed* masculine pleasures and their dissemination across the incoherence of trans bodies have crystallized a new feminist porn sexual grammar that reconfigures masculine sexuality.⁴ To render this new grammar epistemologically significant, three related sets of questions need to be addressed: What does feminist masculine sexuality look like? What are its affective economies? How is it that feminist porn—some thirty years after the infamous feminist porn wars—has become not only a means of depicting transmasculine sexuality in productive ways, but a potent interlocutor and champion?

I. Penetrating Feminist Masculinities

Masculinity's desires *in* porn and *for* porn have posed significant challenges for thinking the proximity of "feminist" to "porn" in any terms other than suspicion. Fundamentalist feminisms unequivocally opposed to pornography, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon,

as well as contemporary antiporn crusaders Gail Dines and Robert Jensen, have cast masculinity and its desires as always dangerously and essentially pornographic—that is, innately exploitative, objectifying, dangerous, and violent.⁵ Writing some thirty years after Andrea Dworkin, Robert Jensen contemporizes such a structure of feeling. Deploying the same rhetorical strategies that Dworkin sets in motion, what is used most frequently in this economy of critique is an (imagined) unmediated documentary realism that takes up masculinity only to underscore the brutalities of sex for women in porn. One of the primary effects of such a rhetorical style is a deeply ironic standpoint essentialism that both consumes the pornography it decries *and* advances a self-punishing, self-bullying, and moral panic about masculinity itself. In his book on masculinity and porn, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (2007), Jensen grounds his argument in just such a claim when he asserts “I get erections from pornography. I take that to be epistemologically significant; my body understands the charge of pornography. Because I was raised in a sexist culture with few (if any) influences that mitigated that sexism, I am in a position to explore how that sexual charge is connected to the ideology of male dominance and female submission that structures contemporary commercial pornography.”⁶

The strategy of imagining pornography through the lens of documentary realism is evident throughout Jensen’s text, one he dedicates to the memory of Dworkin. Arguing the obvious, that there is a growing interdependence between capitalism and pornography, Jensen states in the imperative that one cannot liberate masculinity from itself; one instead must destroy it. In Jensen’s words: “One response to this toxic masculinity has been to attempt to redefine what it means to be a man, to craft a kinder-and-gentler masculinity that might pose less of a threat to women and children and be more livable for men. But such a step is inadequate; our goal should not be to reshape masculinity but to eliminate it.”⁷ The allusion to “elimination” here is extremely noteworthy. *Eliminate*, comes from the Latin *eliminatus*, meaning “to be turned out of doors” or “through a threshold”—which also connotes to put an end to something; to kill, destroy, or make somebody or something ineffective; to defeat and put a player or team out of a competition; to remove something as irrelevant or unimportant; and interestingly, last but nowhere near least, to expel waste from the body. This is curious. Part of what Jensen suggests with this rhetoric of elimination is that, in addition to surrendering the desire to reconstruct masculinity—something he claims is an inadequate response—masculinity instead needs

to be categorically destroyed, removed, killed off, and, expelled as waste. Of course, the claim here is supported by both of the teleologies and tautologies in Jensen's logic: "I get erections from pornography. I take that to be epistemologically significant." Jensen concludes two points about the male body and its sexual responses: first, it is involuntary in its responsiveness; and second, that such responsiveness itself is a priori evidence of abject, irresolvable culpability and guilt. Masculinity writ noncomplicitous remains unthinkable.

Such corporeal self-evidence and abjection are precisely what Judith Butler has cautioned against in her work while, at the same time, acknowledging the vitality of the unthinkable in other ways and on different terms. Although Jensen, Dworkin, and Butler each write the impossible body as the effect of heteronormative hegemonies, Butler's construction of embodiment differs from Jensen's. Where he details a body constructed by its overdetermined biological need to occupy and destroy femaleness as a drive toward achieving normalized manhood, for Butler, the body is the effect of normative social processes and can, in turn, "occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation."⁸ In other words, where matter for Jensen must inscribe no possibility of excess, Butler finds rearticulation as a fundamental part of why matter must be inhabited in excess of itself and incoherently for both theory and politics. "Bodies are not," Butler writes, "inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification—depending upon their interactions—and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future."⁹ What emerges vis-à-vis Jensen's rearticulation of antipornography feminism and masculinity is precisely the opposite of what Butler seeks to map. Jensen's is a flow of affect not only grounded in mimesis, or an assumption of realism without mediation. Instead it is affect produced relationally (as a mediation between text and audience), an affect that is also heavily invested in constituting masculinity through problematic and very limited subject positions: the only feminist affect available for masculinity is self-punishment, despair, and debilitating pathos. Jensen punctuates and performs such pathos throughout his text by lamenting, "I am sad. It feels like there are few ways out" for a masculinity trapped in the guilty male body and for whom elimination is the only remedy.¹⁰ If Sara Ahmed is right when she posits that affect is not what flows naturally or organically from the individual body but is what holds or binds the social body together, then we must ask what is the affect of feminist masculinity in the individual and social body within feminist porn?¹¹

II. Female-to-Male Trans Men: Mirroring Masculinity's Pleasures of Penetration

With notable exceptions, explicit sexual representations of FTM trans bodies have been few and far between until very recently. Even more obscure, at least in a public, representational sense, are those same bodies as sexual bodies. If, as I have argued recently, FTM trans men are one site of political and corporeal incoherence where embodied sex, gender presentation, erotic object choice, and desire organized around sexual acts do not align normatively or within grids of intelligibility, then might these same bodies be similarly productive as sites of masculine *and* feminist sexualities?

Feminist porn scholars should take note of the increasing presence of FTM trans men in the feminist porn circuit. In some ways, trans male bodies have always been a part of feminist post-porn cultures. The term “post-porn” has already been put into circulation through two different circuits of production with different histories: one through sex worker Annie Sprinkle who pre-dates the self-described contemporary feminist porn culture; and the second through trans-porn artists like those documented in this project. That these circuits overlap on trans bodies in contemporary porn is no accident. Annie Sprinkle begins to shape these *post* temporalities of feminist porn when she identifies herself as a mainstream porn worker, as a feminist, and as a “post-porn modernist” long before the self-hailed practices of feminist porn artists come into existence.¹² As noted by Shannon Bell, Sprinkle’s show *Post Porn Modernist* is an amalgamation of shorter performance pieces that Sprinkle has performed since approximately 1984.¹³ Sprinkle’s work documents her transition both in terms of identity (from birth name “Ellen Steinberg” to self-made “Annie Sprinkle”) and worker in the mainstream pornography industry, which includes over two hundred “porno movies,” numerous magazines, and her work in the sex trade. However, the importance of her performance work to feminist porn cannot be overstated. As noted by Bell (1994), Schneider (1997), Williams (1999), and others, Sprinkle was one of the first to fuse “feminism” and “porn” at a time in history when such an articulation seemed oxymoronic.¹⁴ In the early 1980s, Sprinkle, Candida Royalle, Veronica Vera, and others began to challenge the perceived impossibility of feminists inside the industry as feminist sex workers. Bell notes the stakes and impact: “It was a turning point in three ways [. . .] the documentation by prostitute/porn stars that they are capable of thinking, talking, and communicating their feelings, that they are neither stupid nor victims, and that they made a choice to work in pornography. It was a turning point in the porn debate because a new

feminist viewpoint was introduced, that of the female porn actor. And it was a turning point in terms of introducing a new genre of feminist performance art.¹⁵

The trans guys putting their bodies on display mark yet another turning point. Their representation in feminist porn began with Annie Sprinkle's post-porn work. *Linda/Les and Annie*, a film produced by and starring Sprinkle, emerges as not just one of the first docu-porn films—a genre using a mix of both documentary film techniques (especially the interview) and porn conventions—but also as the first sexually explicit film to feature a sexual FTM body post-transition. *Linda/Les and Annie* centers around FTM Les Nichols, after his surgical sex-reassignment that, for him, included a phalloplasty, the surgical production of a penis. There's much to be analyzed in this film—not the least of which is its overemphasis on the American ideology of freedom, tattooed on Les's chest—but for my purposes here it remains very interesting for its depictions of both FTM genitals and sexual practice. In the film, Annie is his sexual partner and together, in front of the camera, they explore this transition and Les's body in a sexual context, attempting to use Les's penis for penetration. They also both reflect upon the surgery, their sex play, and their respective processes after Les's transition. Phalloplasty procedures are not a perfected medical procedure and, one of the things Annie and Les discover and depict is the degree to which penises produced through this procedure cannot become erect enough for penetration. Despite what might be construed as a moment awash in pathos and failure, Les and Annie “make a few adjustments”—as the voice-over tells—and continue to fuck each other for the camera using Les's pussy and new penis simultaneously. Even as Sprinkle performs for the camera, her voice-over narrates the complexity of what I will identify as the work of feminist/femme entrustment, as a femme to whom butch, genderqueer, and FTM sexual intimacy is extended in a complexly gendered and queer grammar. Although it would not be wrong to argue that the camera and the voice-over equally fetishize as much as feature Les's new genitals, the film remains important as part of a visual archive of FTM sex-reassignment histories as well as queer trans sex practices between a feminist pornographer and FTM trans man.

Of course, there are vast and important histories marking the temporalities between *Linda/Les and Annie* and more recent depictions of FTM bodies and trans sex in recent porn. What trans bodies in contemporary feminist porn share with Sprinkle's post-porn is a corporeal, representational, and lived problematic that, in the twenty-first century, does what *Linda/Les and Annie* could not yet do in 1989: disrupt expectations of but also the variously complex pleasures *in* gendered and sexual inco-

herence. What emerges in today's FTM/transgender porn cultures, is no longer pathos but a productive space of ambivalence and incommensurateness about sexual trans bodies and, more precisely, about sexual penetration. Trans masculinities in feminist post-porn raise complex questions about bodies: How are trans men reorganizing normative constructions of what's being called the bonus hole, the former "vagina," after surgeries? And within genres of sexual representation that rely upon the supposedly unmediated body on display for the audience, what kinds of psychic, social, and visual negotiations are required to mitigate against the essentializing and representational stubbornness of that 'hole' once penetrated both sexually and visually? Feminist porn is, in part, shaped through an epistemological and political imperative of incoherence, and this incoherence informs its visual language. This imperative to rupture sense is itself complicated. When it is both the ground of public cultures and the imperative of feminist porn, how then might it be used as a trope to represent that which is already constituted as incoherent: trans bodies? In 1989, Les and Annie use the language of "bisexuality" and "pussy" when contextualizing the economies of bodies, sex, and desire. In more recent work, these languages change dramatically, begging that we question how the subjects of these ironic overdeterminations (that is, between sex, sexuality, and gender)—stone butches, genderqueers, and FTMs—negotiate their sexual complexities in front of a camera held, as it were, by queer and feminist pornographers? In two other films—one documentary, Debra A. Wilson's *The Butch Mystique* (2003), and one docu-porn, Luke Woodward's *Enough Man* (2004), penetration is characterized by FTMs as a very gendered sexual practice and decidedly invasive. Not only is the *event* of penetration persistently gendered by the subjects in these films, it often marks spaces of trauma, shame, and ambivalence for FTM trans men. But when is a vagina no longer a vagina? These films provoke questions about the names, meanings, and uses of body parts as they do the work of gender and power at the same time. The transed body, overdetermined either as "female" for butches or "incomplete with a penis" for FTM trans men, is supposed to be a site of shame and impossibility. Instead, two strategies begin to emerge in feminist porn: first, as a form with the intention to disrupt both convention and content, feminist porn converts the traumas of being differently gendered into a sexual grammar that desires to see differently. And second, its resistances to essentializing gender are aggressively coded as both counterpublic and sexually queer. How those codings function as visual grammars is where their respective contributions to public sexual cultures become very fascinating. My question, then, is this: Within such economies where embodiment is a site of profound ambivalence and

political shaming for butches and/or FTMs, how then might social and discursive power be negotiated through complex sexualities and incoherent and yet decidedly masculine identifications? What kind of work is being accomplished through these complex desires to put another incoherence—the “man pussy”—on display as self-constructed visual spectacle vis-à-vis feminist porn? Is that work, for FTMs, similar to the gender work accomplished through the repeated, and hence, ambivalent public and performative refusals of penetration for some butches? Can both moments—the moments of self-constitution through representation as well as through performativities like a repeated refusal—be read as a redeployment of cultural and political shame animating these bodies and grammars of incoherence?

III. “*Seeing the Hole*”: On the Incoherent Grammars of Post-Porn’s Looking Relations

The subjects interviewed in the award-winning documentary, *The Butch Mystique*, bear witness to the productive potentialities of these correlations. Produced and directed by Debra A. Wilson, and decidedly not porn in its form, *The Butch Mystique* tracks the “mystique” surrounding female and trans masculinities in the lives of a group of African American butch-studs and, in a couple of cases, (FTM) trans identified, folks, many of whom take up the term “fag” to self-constitute a representation of, and a lived relation to queer masculinity.

At first glance, subjects of female and transgender masculinity identified with the masculinities evoked by the term “fag” might seem strangely incoherent. The term signals gay identity and evokes a set of epistemologies that govern the relationship between masculinity, bodies, and sexuality. Elsy, a FTM from *Butch Mystique* and others in these recent films, self-identify with this term and its overdetermination of the masculine less to *reduce* gender nonconformity to a sexual object choice, but more to reference continuities laterally between particular kinds of masculinities on the receiving end of things, as it were. But on the other hand, the very paradoxical post-queer sexual genders signaled by this term are not at all unlike those articulated by FTM porn star Buck Angel. When asked to what demographic his sex work appeals, he answers, “Gay men enjoy [my] masculinity, they aren’t attracted to women but some of them are definitely into pussy.”¹⁶ The contradiction—that a “pussy” does not always equal a “woman” or “woman with a vagina”—suggests that sexual “genders” articulate bodies despite sex not because of it. So, what the *work* of these post-queer, incoherent sexual

scenes seems to accomplish is a rupture of the way that bodies, genders, and sexual identifications are arranged.

What we see in *Butch Mystique* and *Enough Man* is the shared labor of rearranging the meanings of sexual activities outside of limited heteronormative and misogynist gender overdeterminations. In *Butch Mystique*, for example, Skyler, who has one of the most physically sculpted bodies, performs the difference: “for the butch who [is vaginally penetrated], she’s giving up a lot of trust to that woman.” The concept of entrustment is an active, always negotiated relation. It is likened to something being given up and given over, something exchanged in the sexual scene. It functions like a shared set of agreements and arrangements about how those bodies and desires are materializing in excess or beyond the limits of the conventionally sexed or sexualized body. Such entrustments are visualized and rendered performative in the most recent docu-porn film to which I will turn my attention, *Enough Man*.

Enough Man details the lives and sex lives of mostly white trans men from the United States. Produced and directed by Luke Woodward, *Enough Man* remains one of the most layered archival texts of transsexual practices and bodies. The docu-porn is also remarkable for the way that the trans and queer folks interviewed move through boastfulness and gregariousness at the start of the interviews to very thoughtful, intimate, and piercingly honest accounts of the pleasures and paradoxes of their transformed bodies. Moreover, many of the couples also perform sex scenes in front of the camera. Seeming to pose its own title as a question—that is, when is enough physical or corporeal matter present to qualify a body as male, or when is a man a man?—*Enough Man* answers: when the body in question says so. The body itself, as many trans, feminist, and queer theorists have argued, is a metaphor or/and site of both psychic and social processes.¹⁷ As such, it can be rewritten to mark resistance to those processes at the same time. At least three of the “couples” represented in *Enough Man* code themselves and their sexual genders, at the level of filming, so aggressively for incoherence that the narrative at the heart of the film bends under the weight of visual contradiction. At the same time, a new kind of sense making emerges, once that does not require a reckoning of gender contradiction.

As a lived and embodied lesson in the politics of incoherence, almost all of the trans men in the documentary identify with the “enough” qualifier in their presentations so as to approximate, trouble even, but not necessarily unproblematically reproduce, hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, these same three couples illustrate the degree to which FTM penetration aggressively defies shaming but also reading practices—

popular and academic alike—that need to conflate pussy and penetration with femaleness. Casey and Natalie, Wendell and Randall, as well as Raven and Joshua, all talk in very complex ways about bodies, desires, and genders, before having sex in front of the camera. All self-identify as FTM, except for Natalie, who identifies as femme, cisgendered, and a sex worker (as she puts it, a self-identified “whore”). With the exception of Randall and Wendell, all of the trans men have had some surgical interventions (mostly top surgeries); neither Randall nor Wendell have had top surgery and neither appears to be taking testosterone at the time of filming. All of the couples practice safe sex and consensual BDSM sex to varying degrees. What’s even more interesting is that none of those who appear without clothes on screen have had obvious bottom surgeries; nor do they allow the reductive politics of gender essentialism to fold pussy into female.

Gender and sexuality converge, then, on these incoherent bodies in very complex and antiessentialist ways. Gender is produced not only through surgical and chemical interventions on the body but also emerges in excess of those technologies. Both Casey and Wendell identify their forms of masculinity as what I have described earlier as the incoherence evoked by the term “fag” when layered through female masculinity; each identifies their approximations of manhood as “flaming faggots.” For Casey, though, given his partners are primarily femmes, this strikes a bit of an unusual chord. Like Elyse in *Butch Mystique*, “fag” here marks an antinormative space of gender rather than an exclusive object choice, although the space of manhood in each case is shadowed by the specter of queerness even though that queerness does not function the same way in each case. Casey’s appearance in the documentary supports this; he is wearing gold shorts, a cowboy hat, and his body language resonates in ways less conventionally masculine even though his object choice—femmes—marks his sexuality as heterogendered. Wendell, on the other hand, has not had top surgery, yet his entire gender presentation is much more conventionally masculine. With a crew cut, dressed in army colors, and less flamboyant in appearance, Wendell’s “fag” does signal object choice far more than Casey’s. Wendell’s on-camera sex partner is Randall, another young pre-transition FTM who identifies not only as atypically male (his terms) but also as Wendell’s sexual bottom.

However, what continues to be queerly incoherent in *Enough Man* is the way that these sexual identifications fold over and articulate through gender in an antiessentializing way. These are neither understandings of sexuality reducible to gender identities, nor the sexualities of gender identifications without reiterating either gender or sexuality according to heteronormativity. These are instead something else: complex, trian-

gulated sexual and gendered identifications where each circumvents and interrupts the essentialisms of the other. But these mostly masculinist genders also remain incommensurate with queer sexual performativities and heteronormative genders. For instance, Wendell is a sexual top, so being genderqueer and running the sexual scene allows him to access what he identifies as his actual body underneath his breasts. Randall, on the other hand, as Wendell's boy, bottoms as a decidedly feminine gender expression. "Bottoming," Randall says, "is like a gender expression. I like being a boy who gets put in his place." Both share Wendell's analysis of entrustment, that is, a negotiation around the incoherence of gender identity, bodies, and sexual practice: "Biology and gender are separate. Even if someone has their fingers up my vagina, as long as they perceive me as male it doesn't matter." Raven and Joshua, on the other hand, are both FTMs who exist as part of an intergenerational alternative kinship system/family made up of their relationship plus an MTF transfemme. The three of them have what Raven calls a fluid bond; they have unprotected sex with each other but have protected sex with folks outside of their family. Raven is a top and Joshua is his boy-bottom. They exist in a consensual ownership BDSM relationship where Raven is contractually owner of Joshua's sexuality; dominance/submission is the scenario they perform in front of the camera. Again, this relationship between two FTM transsexual men who have not had bottom surgery transcends essentialism yes, but also conventional and heteronormative kinship systems complete with incest taboo. Raven identifies their kinship, not necessarily their object choices, as trans perverted, suggesting that their relations of kinship are equally as significant in terms of identity as are their gender and sexual identifications. And, it seems, each plays out on the site of the other. Raven is both Daddy-top to Joshua and butch to his wife's femme. Sexuality is articulated through gendered bodies produced as the effect of sex play, even though neither are an index or cause of the other. At the same time, BDSM, which includes penetration through bottoming/topping, becomes an expression of gender identities.

To put this differently: the gender identifications and sexualities of these visual texts are beyond even a simple queering of heteronormative subjectivities. But equally true is the premise that their relative social positionings condition their sexual and gender configurations. If the body is a ground for negotiating social relations precisely because those relations animate that body through trauma, then sexual embodiment (like penetration) functions in potentially productive ways. Ann Cvetkovich reminds us that these experiences are not necessarily traumatic in the more conventional sense of the term but are traumatic in the specific sense that they constitute a breach of bodily boundaries; as

such, they then also have the potential to keep sexuality queer by locating it within public sex cultures that seek to resist shame and perversion rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable.¹⁸ But these incoherent bodies are also part of what Anne McClintock describes as an economy of conversion, as a kind of sexual theater or stage that borrows its décor, props, and scenes from the everyday cultures of power, inverting that culture's ability to regulate by making public that which is supposed to be kept as private. Trans bodies as feminist porn do to gender what BDSM does to sexuality: each performs social power as "both contingent and constitutive, as sanctioned neither by God nor by fate, but by social convention and invention, and thus open to historical change."¹⁹

But even beyond simply queering them, Casey and Natalie in particular, defy and *penetrate* those grammars. As a sexual top, Natalie's transitively desires the instabilities of Casey's body. Sex play between them is intensely edgy including water sports and genital needle play. Such needle play in the film is evidence of the political uses of sexual incoherence—conditioned by gender and social relations—as the needles themselves are recognizable (to those subject to them) as the means of testosterone injections: the twenty-one gauge, 1.5 inch needle. It is beyond a little ironic, then, that this needle becomes the prop that Natalie uses to quite literally penetrate Casey's man-pussy. Natalie's use of the medicalized mechanisms of sexual reassignment—testosterone needles—marks these sexual bodies and desires as political ones, where the perverse pleasure of the sexual scene is conditioned by the political struggle to access still heavily regulated sex reassignment technologies in the first place. As a politicized and perverse resignification of the trans man's supposedly corporeal "failure" as a man (that his body is not "man enough" to produce its own testosterone or penis, a failure ambivalently hinted at in *Linda/Les and Annie*), this scene in particular sutures sex play and penetration to the social world but also calibrates them both through a queering of differently gendered shame. These are the very telling and complex inversions of feminist porn: As a man, Casey becomes Natalie's object to her subject and her pleasure circumvents, indeed, penetrates, his. But judging by the object of penetration (that is, the needle), neither is his completely irrelevant. As a femme top, Natalie takes her pleasure in finding a trans(itive)-object for her quite active desire; these sexualized objects (trans boys) cannot exist without a subject (femme top) through which their own ability to act as a subject depends. The scene, then, of BDSM between them becomes a feminist sexual grammar necessitated by their gender incoherence but equally fuelled by a politi-

cal deployment, imperative even, of perverse pleasure as the *raison d'être* of feminist post-porn.

Moreover, where many docu-porn films about FTM cultures circumvent the incoherence and incompleteness of the FTM body, *Enough Man*, as public post-porn, puts that body unblushingly on display within what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick named nonce taxonomies, ever proliferating but contingent categories in a taxonomy neither recognizable nor secured by a binary truth regime.²⁰ Living in a FTM transsexual body is, of course, living in, with, and through corporeal incoherence. Very few FTMs can afford successful lower surgery as most phalloplasties remain simply cost prohibitive. *Enough Man*, and Casey in particular, both take those private masculine anxieties about living with indeterminate bodies (that is, bodies that might pass as male in public but could not pass visual inspection) and refuse the social shaming by allowing the camera to film the physical site that is quietly and euphemistically identified among FTM men as “the tranny bonus hole.” In his interviews with FTMs as well as with intersexed folks, Colin Thomas teases out the way that transitive folks rearticulate gender possibilities based on a decoding of the binary gender system even as that system attempts to limit its subjects. “Hanging out with gender-variant people,” Thomas writes, “can quickly dislodge one’s concepts of what it means to be male or female, gay or straight.”²¹ In fact, one of his interview subjects notes how these limits of language mirror the limits of bodies when “he” says: “If there was a tranny pronoun, I’d use it . . . I’m male, but I’m not suddenly this bi-dude either [. . .] I do plan on keeping my tranny bonus hole [though]. That’s staying.” This is not the same site of physicality that equally defines heteronormative femininity and some radical-fundamentalist feminisms (the vagina-as-sheath-for-penis) and by implication lesbianism (the for-women-only vagina); this is the paradoxical space that defies existing gender and sexual taxonomies but which uses their imperatives as foreplay. As a way to pay homage to the early feminist porn workers, and to Annie Sprinkle in particular, as a queer trans son of this post-porn movement, Casey does a performance piece in the film that he calls his “Andy Sprinkle.” With partner Natalie holding a flashlight, Casey puts his feet into stirrups and invites the viewer, assisted by Natalie and through the camera’s gaze, to quite literally look at his genitals and into his vagina or what he calls his boy hole. Narrated through a voice-over by Natalie—a voice-over narration directly evocative of Sprinkle’s in *Linda/Les and Annie*—“Andy’s” scene puts that productive space of nothingness and impossibility fully on display, situating his body within a public representation while challenging its essentialisms at the same time.

There's something vertiginously incoherent about Andy's body literally in motion between sexes, reducible to neither, bearing traces of both, and owned, and narrated, in queer representational circuits of desire, by his femme top. Gendered discourses of shame might compel the composition of the sexual scene but their work is rendered mute.

When analyzed together and despite their differences in form, both *The Butch Mystique* and *Enough Man* provide the opportunity to reconsider gender work both accomplished and deconstructed through sexual identifications as they are put on display in feminist porn. As much as the grammars of gender essentialism and heteronormativity both regulate identification through a politics of shame, each is interrupted by that which the other cannot fully constrain or contain. Elyse, Wendell, and Casey's gendered sexual space of "fag" masculinity is available to trans men as a productive trope of gendered sexual receptivity staged and triangulated through those same shaming logics. In this case, however, identification and desire are not conditioned or enabled by the foundational and sexed body; that is, viewing or desiring as a woman or a man as limited by essentialist bodies. Instead, these texts depict self-unmade transed bodies that sexual incoherence animates instead of defeats. In fact, that image of a man with a pussy being penetrated is indicative of what Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake call the lived and defiant messiness of gender as productive contradiction, not as failure.²² Within this gendered sexual culture, the vagina becomes bonus hole becoming "pussy," which becomes gender without genitals, empty signifier without referent. Penetration signifies a compelling incoherence where top-bottom, active-passive, male-female, gay-straight dichotomies become sexually deconstructed imperatives. Annie Sprinkle may have been quite ironic when she suggested that "you can never demystify a cervix."²³ But what these trans men suggest is that both *in* and *as* feminist post-porn, it might actually be possible to penetrate its intransigent coherence instead.

IV. Postscript: "I'm just a feminist interested in cock": Knowing Dick at the Feminist Porn Awards 2011

The contingency of this queerly proliferating post-porn taxonomy resignifying masculinity is best evident through the Feminist Porn Awards (FPAs) event held annually in Toronto. Growing in size exponentially, the Feminist Porn Awards recognize and celebrate "feminist smut" through a three-day long event culminating in the awards ceremony where awards are given out to porn stars, producers, distributors, directors, and cast in a variety of categories ("Hottie of the Year"; "Most Diverse Cast"; "Best Bi Film"; "Most Tantalizing Trans Film"; "Sexiest Straight Movie"; "Hottest

Kink Movie”; and “Movie of the Year” to mention only a few categories). The FPAs have grown over the last six years to become far more than just a celebratory event. Porn workers, producers, and distributors recognize that the demographic, scope, and increasingly very diverse local and international audience of the FPAs present a unique opportunity not previously available to hail, champion, and market the work done by feminist porn.

Although not necessarily a consistent feature of all feminist porn, penetrating intransigence is most certainly a reoccurring structure of perverse feeling that marks the sexual affective grammars of feminist porn as something different from nonfeminist porn. And again, while trans bodies are not a stock feature of every instance of feminist porn, this culture is marked by its insistence that one neither can nor should make assumptions that the bodies both in front of and behind the cameras are *not* trans bodies either. Finally, and most tellingly, where feminist fundamentalisms remain profoundly ambivalent about and suspicious of masculinity, feminist porn operates differently in two ways. It features different kinds of masculine subjects as objects of desire in its productions—FTM, trans, genderqueer, butch, and cisgender—but it also rethinks the consumption practices of masculinity, refusing to accept a feminist politic that assumes that heterosexual cissexual male performers or spectators or desires are dangerous. In fact, what trended at the 2011 Feminist Porn Awards, both in terms of content but also in terms of culture, was an entirely reconfigured epistemological proximity to, and desire for, masculinity. One could not help but discern different economies of masculinity, feminist sexuality, and queer affect within the post-porn—post-queer even—cultures of feminist porn, cultures and practices ultimately repudiated and disavowed by antipornography feminist fundamentalism. Two very interesting workers inside feminist porn—one behind the camera, one in front of the camera—illustrate the post-queer knowledges repeated as motifs throughout the 2011 FPAs: rising heteromale superstar Mickey Mod and filmmaker-extraordinaire Shine Louise Houston, often dubbed in the feminist porn literature as “the ethical pornographer.” Identified originally as a “lesbian of color” (most recently updated to “queer person of color”), Houston is the filmmaker/producer who directed and produced the film *The Crash Pad (TCP)* in 2005 and created the online series based on it (*CrashPadSeries.com*).²⁴ The *TCP* is fascinating in its design and actualization: the concept is an apartment where anonymous folks have sex in the space rigged with cameras. In its beginnings, *TCP* first depicted lesbian hookups but it evolves, and in so doing, begins to map the trajectory tracked here across feminist porn (in no particular order): from lesbian couples the bodies

transform into butch-femme, genderqueer, punk queer, tattooed queer, to girl/femme on girl/femme to transvag sex to threesomes to FTM bear sex to Mickey Mod in a threesome with another porn superstar Syd Blakovich; and then beyond to reality porn online live where recognizable superstars in the feminist porn world like Nina Hartley hook up with newcomer superstars like genderqueer performer Jiz Lee.²⁵ Mickey's appearance in the *TCP* series is extremely noteworthy. He is one of the first cisgendered men to appear in the series. But most significantly, he becomes a kind of bridge to a differently gendered and queered economy of looking and the desire to know masculinity differently—an epistemology performed through a queer feminist gaze, as Houston launches a new gay/male porn website practice HeavenlySpire.com with Mickey as its posterboy.²⁶ Heavenly Spire is a project of fascinating incoherence centering a very willful feminist gaze and camera directly on the bodies of queer masculinity. To borrow from its own description, it is “a Shine Louise Houston creation for the purpose of masculine appreciation. Heavenly Spire focuses on masculine beauty and sexuality and how it manifests on different bodies. Following the same vision as Houston's previous projects, Heavenly Spire focuses on capturing genuine pleasure with a unique cinematic style.”

Houston is the master of the profound one-liner in which she maps the paradigm shifts that result in feminist porn and which it, in turn, enables. I will end with both. At the 2010 FPAs in an acceptance speech on stage, Houston very specifically evokes one of the most significant feminist thinkers of the twentieth century—Audre Lorde: “What I've learned in this business is that you absolutely can dismantle the master's house using the master's tools . . .” Curious though is the unique feminist porn twist on Lorde's infamous axiom “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”²⁷ At the 2011 FPAs, Houston puts her own queer inversion of Lorde's axiom into effect when, at the podium receiving an award for her new website, she thanked the crowd and said “[My website Heavenly Spire] is just pure self-indulgence for a feminist interested in cock.” And based on audience response, it seemed that there was barely a person in attendance who didn't agree that masculinity never looked better.

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Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!



LOREE ERICKSON

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I'd like to tell you a story, which, as it turns out, is in fact at least three related stories.

1. Everyday Moments Can Say a Lot

One day, which really could be any day, I left my house in a rather good mood. I had found a lovely patch of sunshine to sit in while I waited for the bus. Soon I was joined by another bus rider who stood about four or five feet away from me. In a minute or two, another person passed by with no real difficulty, but found it necessary to grumble at me while passing that I “should have parked [my] car” (more appropriately called a wheelchair) elsewhere as I was blocking the sidewalk. I wasn't blocking anything. The person who was waiting with me was shocked that this other person had made such a rude, ableist comment. I was not surprised. Nor was I surprised by the message behind his words, which was: You are in the way. You and “your car” are taking up too much space. I just let it go and waited. I was relieved when the bus that arrived moments later was accessible, and was a bit surprised when the other person waiting stepped to the side to allow me on, rather than rushing/pushing past me—as many people tend to do, making the bus more difficult to navigate.

As I waited for the driver to ready the bus, the person who had been waiting with me looked at the step of the bus and then to my power

wheelchair and asked if I needed help. I simply replied that the bus has a ramp. Behind this sort of well-intentioned query is the ever-present assumption that I am in need of help. I also get this when I am sitting somewhere waiting to meet a friend. People just come up to me and ask if I am okay. As the bus pulled away, I was thinking about how back-to-back these moments were when I heard a loud shrill voice from the back of the bus exclaim, “You’re amazing!” I froze. “The way you just whipped that little cart of yours right in that spot.” I ignored it, too tired after three ableist encounters in ten minutes to offer any witty comebacks in response, and too angry to feel like educating anyone.

These three encounters are not isolated or individual experiences. Sadly, they are common and systemic. These three moments only tell us some of what disability means, how it appears, and how it is done. Disabilities, and many associated experiences, are often reduced to essentialized biomedical limitations or malfunctions of certain bodies. Disability can more accurately be described as a process enacted through social relations.

Though the term disability appears to describe bodies and how they act/move/inhabit/sense/think/exist/communicate, the label carries the weight of how these bodies are deemed inferior to other bodies through illusory, arbitrary, and compulsory social and economic standards designed to enable certain ways of being over others. Disability is a complex, intersectional, cultural, and fluid constellation of experiences and constructs.

While this is my story of systemic ableism, it is not—and could not be—every story of systemic ableism. My story is reliant on my particular embodiment and cultural context, which includes, but is not limited to, physical disability, whiteness, with a high level of education. As a thirty-four-year-old queer femmegimp who lives below the poverty line, I am marked by a unique interplay of identities.¹ Disability never appears in isolation; it is always interrelated with other marginalities and privileges. Systemic ableism manifests based on other marginalities and privileges (race, other experiences of disability, class, gender, and beyond).

The encounters in the story above tell something about how people make sense of my body: both the anxieties they project onto it and the simultaneous erasures they enact. These are moments among many where the relations of power reveal themselves. For example, the idea that people take up “too much space” underscores the notion that some people are worthy of occupying space and others are not—and is reminiscent of other sociohistorical practices of isolation and segregation. In *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, Tanya Titchkosky writes, “The meaning of disability is composed of conflicts of inclusion and

exclusion as this intersects with our ordinary ways of recognizing people . . . or not.”²

2. Why I Became a Porn Star

Disabled people are often imagined as being in the way; unimportant; in need of help; or called “inspirational” for doing ordinary things. Disabled people are imagined as less capable than or not as good as “normal” people (a problematic term as well). All of these attitudes simultaneously bolster and create policies and practices that propagate the association of disability with undesirability. We see this in state-sponsored practices of funding and mandating institutionalization through incarceration in prisons, psychiatric wards/hospitals, group homes, and nursing homes over community-based support; in immigration policies using racist, capitalist, and ableist definitions of who counts as a desirable citizen; in historic and contemporary eugenic ideals (affecting marginalized bodies and minds of all varieties); in “lives not worth living” rhetoric and consequent denial of medical treatment to those deemed unworthy; as well as in welfare and disability income programs that keep us impoverished and hungry.

The same structures that affect other areas of our lives, creating an overwhelming climate of devaluation, also regulate our sexual lives.³ From forced and coerced sterilization to institutional surveillance that limits privacy, there are multiple systems that pathologize, control, and punish the sexual explorations and expressions of disabled people. Common paternalistic assumptions hypersexualize and/or portray disabled people as hypervulnerable. This damaging ideology is used to justify segregation. Disabled people—all people—need affirming resources, sex-positive information, and ways to realize their sexual potential. Antisex laws in many US states criminalize certain sexual activities that may be preferred ways for some disabled people to experience pleasure and express desire.

Disabled people are also often subjected to medical and psychological gawking that objectifies, stigmatizes, and pathologizes our experiences of our bodies including our minds.⁴ Many children who are born with or acquire their disabilities early on are told directly and indirectly to not expect to have a family or anyone ever romantically love them.⁵ Disabled people experience the cumulative effects of this extensive system of desexualization every day.

People have begun organizing around this site of oppression as honestly and effectively as we have for other issues of access and justice. There are many barriers associated with this type of organizing and it is

often deprioritized. In part, this is because there has been a disconnection between sexuality and other needs. It can be argued that one should focus more on needs such as housing, adequate attendant care, employment, transportation, and the like. However, this omission of sexuality ignores how profoundly interconnected all of these aspects of our lives are. Another part of the struggle to include sexuality as an organizing goal requires us to challenge the way sex operates in western society. We learn to associate shame with sex. We are surrounded by images that convey a very narrow definition of sex and of desirable bodies. We learn we are not supposed to talk about sex. This framing of normative desire is larger than life, and does not make room for a whole range of enjoyable experiences and possibilities. When sex is thought of as a bountiful playground for the relatively few who can approximate the illusory ideals of the desirable body (skinny, white, able-bodied, rich, and so on), then sex, desire, and pleasure for the rest of us remains relatively invisible. Sex and sexual expression are also often dismissed as frivolous “wants” rather than fundamental aspects of humanity. This is especially true for people with disabilities.

Although it is felt as a personal and private emotion, shame is spun—constructed by our socio-political-cultural institutions and the medical industrial complex—to internalize, naturalize, and individualize many of the oppressions mentioned above as well as others. As Abby Wilkerson argues, “Shame is not so much a psychological state of individuals as such (even though it may shape individual subjectivity), but rather a socially based harm which oppressed groups are subject to in particular ways . . . Shame is deployed as a ‘political resourc[e] that some people use to silence or isolate others.’”⁶ I would like to expand this idea to include how shame is used not only as a tool of social control to isolate us from each other, but to keep us from accessing those very parts of ourselves, our bodies, our desires, and our experiences (usually wrapped up in our differences from that illusory ideal mentioned earlier) that hold the most potential for change by offering us a different way of being in the world.

Rather than hide away, deny, and ignore those very sites of the deepest shame, we must not only embrace them and learn from them, we need to flaunt them.

What better way to flaunt conventions of sexuality than by making porn? Pornography is surrounded by shame. We feel shame for watching it, enjoying it, making it, and buying it. The content of porn also often instills shame in us. We can feel badly for not living up to certain standards (both in terms of not fitting the mold of which bodies are seen as beautiful and in terms of not measuring up in sexual prowess and skills). There is porn that demeans our identities and experiences and replicates

oppressive power dynamics. Porn is complex, multifaceted—and yes—powerful. Rather than attempt to regulate and control it, which only drives it more underground and into the hands of those with privilege, we need to follow in the work of sex-positive feminists and explore the many benefits that pornography made from such alternative perspectives has to offer.⁷

This all may seem an unlikely beginning to porn stardom. By making queercrip porn, I moved out of line and took the “queer” and “wonky” path to place new stories within reach.⁸ I took this path to open up new possibilities and imaginings.

My journey began in a progressive sex shop in San Francisco in 2000; I was looking at an issue of *On Our Backs*, a lesbian porn magazine, featuring an article on sex and disability. I was so excited . . . until I opened to the article. There was one picture of someone in a wheelchair with someone sitting on their lap kissing them. This one picture—the only image combining sex and disability I had found up to that point in my life—was inverted, so the image was obscured and barely recognizable. I wanted to see bodies that looked and moved and felt like mine represented in the exciting, but clearly still problematic, queer sexual culture. I wanted to see something that reflected my desires! I wanted to know that desiring people like me was possible. I resolved then and there to become a porn star.

In the summer of 2006, I made a short film called *want*, which weaves together sexually explicit images with everyday moments and scenes of the ableist world. It works to get people hot and poses an insightful, complex, honest, and sexy image of disability and gender transgressive bodies. *want* was clearly wanted. It won several awards, and continues to screen internationally at film festivals, conferences, and workshops.

I wouldn't be making porn right now if I weren't so pissed off. I would not be making porn if I hadn't struggled for most of my life to be recognized as a sexy and sexual being, or if the world wasn't so fucked up. But making porn is one of the best things I've ever done. On a political level, it allowed me to make a movie that would not only offer a moment of recognition of how sexy queercrips could be, but also a way to tell others how I wanted to be seen. Making this video allowed me to take up space and reconceptualize what is sexy.

Personally, it was an amazing experience—and not just because of all the really great sex. The three of us (my co-star, the video artist, and I) created a space of comfort, beauty, respect, and desire. To be able to share that with others is truly remarkable. That day was one of the first times in my life that I felt wanted for exactly who I am. The first time I felt that was with my first lover. Unfortunately, experiences like these are

rare for many people. Despite the sheer joy of the day—I must have been smiling for days afterward—it took me a while to work up the nerve to watch the video footage. I was afraid that what I might see would allow all those stories I was trying to erase to reemerge and pollute my experience of that day. While there were some bits that were hard to watch, it turned out to be not so bad—and kind of hot. I could see that I was sexy. I still feel that pull of doubt, but I am building up a whole host of stories, salacious stories, to counter the other ones.

3. Being a Porn Star is Hard Work

Before this turns into a simple story of overcoming adversity, I would like to complicate things a bit. “Flaunting it” is not without its difficulties, but it does help to loosen up the knots a bit and free up more space for imagining. Because our bodies, identities, desires, and experiences have multiple meanings, we need multiple stories. We need stories of love, lust, and other stuff. We need the success stories and the stories of pain and frustration. We also need stories about the work that stories being told about us, without us, do. These stories still inform our stories. We also need to look at the work that our stories do. Here are some stories that attempt to do that work.

Mainstream porn uses a series of conventions to shape the discourse of what is considered sexy. As I mentioned earlier, we can feel shame for not measuring up to these standards. Despite my politics, while editing, I found myself tempted to recreate those standards. I wanted to edit out the messy stuff, the very things that made this porn different. Wouldn't leaving in these sites of shame make it so that we wouldn't have to feel bad when we don't fall seamlessly into bed with our hair splayed out perfectly on the pillow? I've seen other porn movies that do this. They show pauses for gloves and lube and the negotiation process: “Try moving my leg here,” or “I like this,” or “Touch me here.” How powerful would it be to show that when we fell back or slipped, it didn't ruin anything? We just kept going. Then I realized that, within the constellation of power relations, I had somewhat contradictory aims. How far could I go toward a new vision of sexy and still be recognized as sexy? How far could I go away from that standard referent and not be discounted as too different or have my film written off as a fetish film? If, as Foucault contends, we can never get outside of power, then how do we create something new without reinforcing oppressive ideologies? In the end, I compromised; I showed bits of both.

Alongside the delicious moments of recognition that have come from making queercrip porn, there are also those moments when the norma-

tive paradigms that limit and/or shape our understandings in a given context are revealed. For example, some people assume that my co-star and I are lesbians. Part of this assumption is based on their normative readings of gender; for instance, taking a certain tone of voice as implying a corresponding gender or reading what is sometimes a dildo as only ever a dildo (when sometimes it is someone's cock). In the moments of reading me/us as either straight or as lesbians, the embodiment of and desire for gender-transgressive bodies (both his and mine) are erased. This assumption presumes that desire occurs along heteronormative binary axes of gender, sex, and sexuality. In addition, the way that disabled people are often denied agency contributes to a lack of recognition of subversively performed gender expression.

Hot genderqueer boy/femmegimp lovin' action must be made unintelligible, yet again, to keep certain bodies and desires in line. I find these moments of "misrecognition" quite revealing and useful. They highlight how difficult it can be to unlearn our ideas that only certain bodies are desirable, but they also emphasize the endless possibilities of embodiment beyond binaries.

The first time I screened *want* at a festival, during the question and answer section, another film director commented, "Eventually your chair faded away and you were just a hot girl getting fucked." He meant it as praise: he was giving me the all too familiar "You were so hot I forgot you were in a wheelchair" compliment. I was not fulfilling the asexual poster-child stereotype that he sees as what disability is; disability and hot sexiness could not exist simultaneously. In his viewing, he made what he considered to be the less desirable bit disappear. But my wheelchair will not just fade away. When I am hot, I am still disabled. I feel it is important to mention that to make this exchange between him and me even possible, I had to fight and win an obnoxious argument about why my screening had to be held in an accessible theatre. Sorry, no, you can't keep your little bubble of queer sex-positive activities or the locations of said activities exactly the same and include me. The alignment of the inaccessible location of the event and his ablest views of "hotness" were not accidental.

Representations of genderqueer boy/femmegimp love are still rare, leaving many viewers unable to imagine these identities, bodies, and experiences outside the difference-effacing liberal frameworks of the dominant culture. This is partly why films like mine are unsettling as well as productive. They create a space for disability and embodied sexuality to co-exist and be seen. They give viewers the opportunity to recognize, re-imagine, and acknowledge that being out of line, being crooked,

being different, and being variant can be smoking hot. This is possible when the performers can feel fully recognized when we do not fall in line or hide our transgressions. As already discussed, shame is a panoptical device used to urge bodies toward assimilation and normalcy. In my life, I have not had the privilege of hiding certain sites of shame in many ways, which has been complicated and in some ways hard, but it has also opened up new possibilities and ways of being in the world. In *want* I show my self as a body that is explicitly sexual and also needs intimate daily personal care. Bodies that cannot or do not hide their interdependence, needs, and leakiness as well as others do, have faced a long history of violence, discrimination, and desexualization. Being regarded as a dependent body is one of the major ways that disabled bodies have been cast as undesirable. I wanted to bring these two supposedly disparate parts of me together because I am certain that disability will never be fully desirable until notions of dependency and care are reworked. I wanted to show how adopting a nontraditional model of meeting my care needs through a collective of people from my community has not only enabled my sexual expression, but opened up a space for so much more. The mutuality of these caring relationships contributes to new ways of being in the world with others.⁹

In the article “Loving You Loving Me: Tranny/Crip/Queer Love and Overcoming Shame in Relationships,” Samuel Lurie states, “being desired, trusting that, reciprocating that cracks us open”.¹⁰ Remaining open and vulnerable is scary because of shame, past hurts (both systemic and interpersonal), and the very real chance of harm, but it is also hard because it means we have to tell new stories. We have to tell stories that contradict the omnipresent chorus that tells us that we are not good enough to be wanted.

These stories can be hard to tell because they can sometimes be hard to believe, but they need to be told because in their telling, they make change possible. As Eli Clare argues:

Never are we seen, heard, believed to be the creators of our own desires, our own passions, our own sexual selves. Inside this maze, the lives of queer crips truly disappear. And I say it's time for us to reappear. Time for us to talk sex, be sex, wear sex, relish our sex, both the sex we do have and the sex we want to be having. I say it's time for some queer disability erotica, time for an anthology of crip smut, queer style. Time for us to write, film, perform, read, talk porn. I'm serious. It's time.¹¹

After I screened *want* at a queer conference in Massachusetts, a young woman with a disability thanked me and told me she had never had a romantic relationship. She told me that before she saw my film, she never even thought it was a possibility for her.

This is the kind of porn I want more of. I want to keep making porn that opens up who and how we love and lust; opens up the ways we experience and understand bodies. I also want more people to make porn that tell our stories of resilience, resistance, and systemic change.

Notes

1. Femmegimp and queercrip are reclaimed words, perspectives, experiences, and sometimes self chosen identities. For one articulation of what being a femmegimp means to me, see Loree Erickson, "Revealing Femmegimp: A Sex-Positive Reflection on Sites of Shame as Sites of Resistance for People with Disabilities," *Atlantis* 31, no. 2 (2007): 42.

2. Tanya Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6.

3. This is true of many experiences of marginalization. An easy comparison is made when looking at laws regarding marriage in the prohibition of interracial marriages, same-sex marriages, and so on.

4. Lisa Blumberg, "Public Stripping," in *The Ragged Edge: The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of the Disability Rag*, ed. Barrett Shaw (Louisville, KY: Advocado Press, 1994), 77–81.

5. *Willing and Able: Sex, Love and Disability*, directed by Lina Cino (Toronto: SexTV, 2003), videocassette.

6. Abby Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 45.

7. Loree Erickson, "Revealing Femmegimp: A Sex-Positive Reflection on Sites of Shame as Sites of Resistance for People with Disabilities," *Atlantis* 31, no. 2 (2007): 42.

8. Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

9. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, "Bodies Together: Touch, Ethics and Disability," in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, eds. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002).

10. Samuel Lurie, "Loving You Loving Me: Tranny/Crip/Queer Love and Overcoming Shame in Relationships," lecture, Queerness and Disability Conference, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, June 2–3, 2002, http://www.bentvoices.org/bentvoices/lurie_loving%20you.htm.

11. Eli Clare, "Sex, Celebration, and Justice: A Keynote for QD2002," keynote speech, Queerness and Disability Conference, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, June 3, 2002, http://www.disabilityhistory.org/dwa/queer/paper_clare.html.