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Women on Top:
The Work of Female Pornographers
and “Sexperimental” Filmmakers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

By

Jennifer Elizabeth Moorman

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Jennifer Elizabeth Moorman
Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television
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Professor Kathleen McHugh, Chair

Through a combination of production studies methodologies and textual analysis, this dissertation examines the gender politics of the American adult film industry and associated marginal and experimental film production cultures, with a focus on the contributions of women filmmakers. Chapters addressing sexually explicit experimental (or “sexperimental”) film; the mainstream adult film industry; lesbian, feminist, and queer pornographies; and both queer and mainstream incarnations of alt-porn illuminate feminist possibilities as well as productive intersections between the art world, pornography, and the academy. Applying the original concepts of “critical arousal” and the “auto-pornographic” mode of production, I assess filmmakers’ investments in various forms of authenticity and both formal and sexual experimentation.

Original research demonstrates a central paradox of women’s pornographic production: the very thing that has made women performers the subject of victim discourses propounded by anti-porn

feminists – their objectification in front of the camera – has also enabled them to achieve creative control from behind the camera. A variety of factors, including the individual’s race, body type, age, body modifications (or lack thereof), and sexuality, can affect a performer’s likelihood to achieve star power and thus also the ease of passage from in front of to behind the camera. The recent proliferation of feminist and queer porn, and of women filmmakers more broadly, has complicated any attempts to pin down “women filmmakers” as a coherent category; the increase in porn production by and for women has enabled an associated increase in diversity, in terms of both the identities of the filmmakers and the bodies and sexualities represented in their film texts. While acknowledging the ongoing blind spots and discrimination in the mainstream sector, against which independent producers and directors continue to struggle, this project shows that the distinctions between “mainstream” and alternative or feminist pornographies are more slippery and complex than many commentators would allow. By addressing these intersections, analyzing experimental film alongside pornography, and highlighting “sexperimental film” as a bridge between supposedly disparate modes of production, this project seeks to situate women filmmakers’ contributions to traditionally patriarchal production cultures, and to break down the conventional classed and gendered binaries that deem pornography mutually exclusive to art or erotica.

The dissertation of Jennifer Elizabeth Moorman is approved.

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2014

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INTRODUCTION

Situating Women Pornographers and Sexperimental Filmmakers

So has pornography long been a myth of sexual pleasure told from the point of view of men with the power to exploit and objectify the sexuality of women. Indeed, only recently has it become possible for pornography, as a genre, to introduce the alternative perspective of women's power and pleasure.

– Linda Williams

I began to wonder: Why should we leave the production of erotic and pornographic images solely in male hands? – Petra Joy

On May 1st of 2012, three days prior to the release of Joss Whedon's blockbuster, *The Avengers*, a porn version of the film had already made its debut. *The Avengers*, in its comics incarnations, has featured a wide variety of superheroes and superheroines. Whedon's film adaptation features only one superheroine – the Black Widow (Scarlet Johansson); all other major characters are male. For *The Avengers XXX: A Porn Parody*, however, director Axel Braun sought "to showcase a more complete Avengers lineup than the one offered by the Hollywood movie."¹ His film thus features a whopping six female protagonists: in addition to the Black Widow, it includes Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel, Sharon Carter, The Scarlet Witch, and the She-Hulk (played by former pro-wrestler Chyna). Porn has widely been accused, in a variety of contexts ranging from the popular to the academic, of being misogynist, exploitative, and disempowering. Meanwhile, Whedon has been hailed in equally varied contexts as a purveyor of feminist images, roles, and ideologies. So I couldn't help but notice an interesting paradox at work in the juxtaposition of these twin adaptations of the comics franchise – if we use the Bechdel Test to compare them, the porn version emerges as the more woman-friendly of the two films.

The Bechdel Test provides a way to determine whether a given film can be described as feminist, empowering, or at least woman-friendly, by applying the following three criteria. The film must: (1) have at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something other than a man.² Although Joss Whedon is best known for creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – a series featuring an undeniably strong, vampire-slaying superheroine who often converses with other women about things other than men – ironically enough, the porn version of *The Avengers* would pass the Bechdel Test, whereas Whedon’s film would not. Beyond representational politics, this example reflects another surprising fact about the industry: unlike their Hollywood counterparts, in the Valley, porn actresses consistently earn more than porn actors.³ The paradox lies in the reasons why the porn version of *The Avengers* allows for so many more major roles for women, and for their greater earning power: namely, the economic imperatives that have functioned to make women’s bodies the genre’s primary form of currency.

In order to address these sorts of complexities, my project will move away from the regulatory framework that has tended to dominate discussions of pornography, in order to focus on gender in relation to elements of porn’s production cultures and the overall structure of the industry, and to assess the possibilities for women’s agency and authorship in the production of pornography, or in some women’s preferred terminology, erotica or sex films. My use of the term pornography, even when some of the filmmakers whose work I discuss eschew it, is a conscious, politicized choice. I am writing about films that include hardcore content – that is, graphic depictions of non-simulated sex acts – and euphemisms only function to further marginalize an industry and genre that have been marginalized through negative exceptionalist discourses that separate out

pornography from other media forms and position it as aberrant. Unlike, say “American exceptionalism,” pornographic exceptionalism positions its subject as exceptional in its presumed lack of value, and my project resists this tendency by addressing pornography as a media form worthy of study. I further apply the term “pornographic” to films created outside of those specific industrial and generic contexts, as part of a larger political project to challenge the somewhat arbitrary and elitist divisions between art and pornography and the problematic essentialism that accompanies feminized notions of the erotic and masculinized conceptions of the pornographic.

Beginning with the feminist “sex wars” of the late 1970s and early ‘80s, popular discourse about cinematic pornography has tended to position it in relation to the law, either as an instance of free speech that must be protected or as a bad object that must be censored.⁴ In recent years, the conversation has shifted to consider pornography in the context of sex work and other labor concerns. A newer generation of feminist film scholarship has tended not to consider whether or not it *should* exist, but rather – starting from the position that it does nonetheless exist – to incorporate a more nuanced range of approaches, including analysis of the politics of representation, labor practices, or aesthetics and generic conventions, among other factors that comprise it as an industry, a genre, and a phenomenon.

My dissertation, in line with this newer trend in pornography studies, will acknowledge the complexities and paradoxes that tend to be elided in popular discussions. I assess the gender politics of pornographic filmmaking: how women are treated and viewed within and in relation to different production contexts, women filmmakers’ labor practices and perspectives on their own work, and the work itself –

across genres and modes of production that would conventionally be considered pornography and those that would not. Pornography can be empowering, but it can also be exploitative, and the structure of the current industry – or so I thought – tends to foster conditions more conducive to the latter than to the former.

When I first embarked on this project, I expected to be assailed with tales of discrimination against women, of the hardships that women have faced in attempting to break into this male-dominated industry. I assumed that impediments to women's access as producers and consumers of pornography have worked to shape the content of pornographic film and video through a cycle of exclusion. Since men have historically had easier access to both the creation and consumption of pornographic texts, their content and aesthetics have reflected common conceptions of heterosexual male sexuality, which in turn have functioned to exclude many – if not most – women. This allows men to remain the primary consumers of porn, and society to conclude that women simply don't like porn because we're "not visual creatures"; which in turn guarantees that porn will continue to reflect stereotypically male sensibilities . . . and so on. So you may imagine my surprise, upon conducting interviews with a variety of women filmmakers, to learn that the vast majority of them believe that their gender, far from holding them back in any way, had given them an advantage when it came to trying to break into directing or producing.

Although they have changed dramatically in the last few decades, historically women's options for agency in the production of pornography have been contingent, restricted, and limited to on-camera roles. A brief history of pornographic production and regulation, women's roles therein, and the ways that they have circulated in legal,

academic, and popular discursive frameworks will situate my intervention. The production of the first pornographic films, stags – referred to by David James as “a true underground” – originated at the turn of the century, with the oldest known stag dated at roughly 1907.⁵ *A Free Ride* (1915) is described by a few sources “as the earliest extant American stag.”⁶ These silent, one-reel films were distributed by and for men, and exhibited illicitly for small audiences, often in a private home or warehouse or in exclusive male clubs. “In the primitive stag film, the primary pleasure seems to involve forming a gender-based bond with other male spectators,” and women’s role was to provide the spectacle over which the men bonded.⁷ Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin argue in *Dirty Movies* that the male actors in stag films are “even less ‘humanized’ than the women, who are, after all the focus of attention.”⁸ In other words, a man’s role in front of the camera is essentially that of a prop; most male actors appear out of necessity, to facilitate the action, whereas the women are the stars, and as such tend to be at least somewhat individuated.⁹

Williams, however, notes that Di Lauro and Rabkin entirely ignore the politics of stags’ exclusively male spectatorship and the overarching power structures that prevented women from both producing and watching these films in which they are so prominently featured. These power structures included, but were not limited to, the Comstock Laws and the socioeconomic domination of women in American society in the first half of the twentieth century. The Comstock law of 1873 prohibited the distribution of “obscene” materials, including “any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion.”¹⁰ Public discourses about female sexuality were scarce and largely inaccurate, and the appropriate forms for female sexuality to assume

were exceptionally limited, steeped in contradiction, and generally framed exclusively in either a reproductive or medicalized framework; any female sexual expression not motivated by reproduction was considered deviant or obscene.

In the 1950s, several events – including the Kinsey Report in 1953, Marilyn Monroe appearing in the first issue of *Playboy* (without her knowledge or consent) in the same year, and the 1957 Supreme Court case *Roth v. United States* (354 U.S. 476), which started the trend among US courts of gradually loosening obscenity laws – indicated the dawning of acceptance of certain kinds of pornography and public sexual discourses. Also, postwar transformations in Hollywood included the testing of censorship codes, and mainstream cinema at this time gradually became more explicit. The “X” rating was initially non-trademarked, and used to indicate that a film contained any content that was deemed not suitable for children. It was thus either self-applied or applied by the MPAA to mainstream films such as *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Because the rating was not trademarked, it was appropriated by pornographers, who used “X” (and eventually the hyperbolic “XXX”) to market their films as transgressive.

In the ‘60s, US courts continued to follow the precedent set by *Roth v. United States*, but “this period of relative deregulation was not without its own set of norms; most obviously, the courts continued to preserve a category – the obscene – that, bereft of social value, does potentially cause harm to its victims, usually posited as victims of men who consume pornography.”¹¹ The “victims” referred to here were configured as porn actresses, assumed to be exploited, coerced, or – at a minimum – objectified; women whose male partners could behave violently or lasciviously toward them after watching pornography; and more generally women as a social class, who would be victimized by

the attitudes toward women engendered by pornography. In the decades that followed, anti-pornography feminists and the religious right alike would take up the banner of protecting these supposed victims. In recent years, men have also been configured as victims, typically of an addiction to pornography.¹²

As Carolyn Bronstein points out, in her meticulously researched monograph on the American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, anti-porn feminist activism emerged from a broader project opposed to media images of violence against women. She locates its origins “in grassroots campaigns against sexually violent and sexist mainstream media content” and points out that members of one such group, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), “were always careful to describe themselves as anti-media violence, and not as anti-pornography.”¹³ It wasn’t until December of 1976, when San Francisco-area feminists founded WAVPM that a group specifically identified “pornography from the outset as an important component of their anti-violence agenda.”¹⁴ And she adds that, “In 1979, the feminist anti-pornography movement seemed to take a decisive turn away from its broad-based set of concerns about media violence with the founding of WAP [Women Against Pornography].”¹⁵

This was a strategic decision: radical feminists like Susan Brownmiller, Gloria Steinem, and Robin Morgan “believed that emphasizing a hot-button issue like pornography, as opposed to media violence, would generate extensive news coverage and community support.”¹⁶ That is, while their concerns focused on media violence more broadly, pornography comprised a convenient target for mobilizing widespread advocacy. In this way, pornography has served as a flashpoint since its first decade as a legally exhibited media form. Although it is a media industry with its own distinctions

and peculiarities like any other, it has been framed through discourses of exceptionalism since its inception, partly because of its illicit origins as an underground, illegal media form, but surely also as a result of this singling out of pornography by groups that originated with a focus on media violence more broadly.

In the '60s and '70s there was, however, an increasing recognition of women as potential (active) consumers of pornography. As Jane Juffer notes, the 1970 *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (the Lockhart Report) “emphasized the rights of adults to purchase and consume whatever sexually explicit material they desire” and suggested that any attempt to regulate the creation and consumption of pornography would “create impediments to a society that perceives sex in a healthy manner.”¹⁷ Along with the gradual loosening of obscenity laws, the Lockhart Report allowed for the mainstreaming of pornography in the early 1970s. Linda Williams notes that, “for the first time, cinematic works containing hard-core action were reviewed by the entertainment media and viewed by a wide spectrum of the population, including, most significantly, women.”¹⁸

The first pornographic feature to be released was *Mona, the Virgin Nymph*, in 1970. In 1972, *Deep Throat* followed suit, opening at the New Mature World Theater in Times Square and grossing over a million dollars, and other commercial hits – *Behind the Green Door* (1972), *Devil in Miss Jones* (1972), and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1975) – soon followed. The so-called “Golden Age” of porn inaugurated by these films enabled women’s access as viewers of pornography in previously unimaginable ways. The very fact of their exhibition in relatively mainstream venues like the New Mature World Theater legitimized the act of porn viewing, and as Juffer notes, the masturbation

discourses that had arisen from the sexual revolution bolstered this legitimacy for women. Betty Dodson's Bodysex Workshops and her book *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Selflove*, published in 1974, encouraged women to explore their own bodies and explained how women can learn to reach orgasm through masturbation. In 1973, Nancy Friday published a book that compiled (and commented on) common sexual fantasies expressed by women, entitled *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*. These and similar discourses encouraged women to explore their bodies and their desires, for their own sake. This championing of female sexuality thereby helped both to dispel the shame that American women had been encouraged to harbor about any public acknowledgement of their sexuality, and to legitimate and demystify the act of viewing sexually explicit movies, which at that time often took as their subject women's quests for sexual satisfaction.

Meanwhile, the crusade against pornography, waged by anti-pornography feminists and political conservatives alike, was picking up steam. These groups were calling for a return to the Comstock era, and the debate was about to reach some sort of climax (as it were), when the issue was suddenly tabled in the wake of the mainstreaming of new technology: the home video revolution supplanted the war on porn. Once pornography was available in the privacy of one's home, the arguments about the dangers of public representations of sexuality lost their potency. Since the advent of home video, the anti-porn faction has focused its ire on sites of distribution; as a result, zoning laws and the "community standards" clause from the landmark 1973 *Miller v. California* (413 U.S. 15) decision have become the most significant form of governmental regulation of pornography. Still dictating standards for obscenity, the *Miller v. California* decision

calls for any potentially obscene material to pass the three-pronged “Miller test”: the work, when viewed as a whole, must appeal to prurient interest; it must depict or describe sexual material in a patently offensive way, as determined by “prevailing community standards”; and it must lack “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” Of course, it could be argued that just about everything has some sort of scientific or artistic value, and that has enabled pornography to flourish in the home video era. At the same time, fears about obscenity law continue to delimit the kinds of content that distributors are willing to carry, and even in the relatively more lenient legal environment of the Internet, video-on-demand (VOD) companies place restrictions on certain types of content (such as fisting¹⁹).

Furthermore, home video, and more recently (and arguably more dramatically) the Internet, have significantly increased women’s access as consumers of porn. Zoning laws mandate, in many states, that adult video cannot be sold within a given radius of schools, churches, or resident areas, which limits access at least through the stigma that this creates, if not by impeding actual mobility, but women’s sex shops and the culture engendered by them have nonetheless proliferated in urban areas over the last two decades.²⁰ The Internet, as both a site of direct distribution via websites with streaming adult content, and as a site of indirect distribution via online retailers that sell adult DVDs, has revolutionized home viewing, and for those with access to it, entirely eliminated the need for a woman (or man) to experience the discomfort that could be provoked by a trip to the local porn store.

In the late ‘70s and into the 1980s, pro-sex feminists like Joani Blank, founder of the feminist sex shop Good Vibrations, began to extend the conversation beyond whether

or not pornography should or should not exist, to how it can enhance women's sexual lives. The Scholar and Feminist IX Conference in 1984, which led to the publication of the seminal book *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (ed. Carol S. Vance), called for feminists to examine, in addition to the dangers of sex, the ways in which sex can bring joy and pleasure into women's lives. In the same year, Candida Royalle founded her production company, Femme Productions, and the 1980s also saw the emergence of Fatale Video and other lesbian porn producers.

Popular accounts of the above-mentioned feminist sex wars tended to frame porn actresses in one of two ways – as victims who beget victims, or as empowered, enlightened feminist subjects – and continue to replicate these oversimplifications. Several things are nearly always left out of the debate: women performers' considerable economic power in comparison to men's, and women's behind-the-camera roles in the production of pornography, in creating and controlling their own sexual images, and in creating lucrative business enterprises. Recent scholarship by Mireille Miller-Young and Celine Parreñas Shimizu – discussed below – has begun to consider these issues by examining the various forms of restricted agency that feminist pornographers can enact. My dissertation will also address the complexities of women's roles in the production of adult video, but in focusing on women who direct and/or produce, I am able to concentrate on less restricted and more overt forms of agency.

A number of academic anthologies about pornography have been published within the last two decades.²¹ All of these texts follow in the wake of the publication of Linda Williams' highly influential *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989, revised 1999) in which she sets out to outline film and video

pornography's generic traits and characteristics, and to employ feminist theory in performing a symptomatic reading of specific texts. She focuses, after a discussion of stag films, exclusively on feature-length narrative pornography. Although she does acknowledge that her book should not at all be taken as a history of the genre, it has nonetheless been regarded as such. After twenty years, and despite both its exclusive focus on feature-length narrative porn with a heterosexual address and the subsequent important contributions from the aforementioned anthologies, *Hard Core* remains the definitive book on the subject.

Unlike Williams, I will be employing industrial analysis, rather than psychoanalytic theory, in conjunction with textual analysis. In *Hard Core*, she does situate texts in the context of socio-historical factors and examine them through the lens of various theories, but her primary argument functions to categorize pornography as a genre according to Schatz's and Dyer's model of the musical. She does not attempt to place filmmakers' words in conversation with their work, nor to categorize or analyze the organization or economics of the industry or the composition of its production cultures. And, with the exception of Candida Royalle and a brief, casual mention of films by other women filmmakers such as Roberta Findlay and Veronica Hart, Williams does not address women's behind-the-camera contributions to pornographic filmmaking.

In the years since the initial publication of *Hard Core*, women filmmakers have become a force to reckon with in the industry. Certainly the field of pornography studies has changed and developed since the book's initial publication, and it is likely that Williams would have modified her arguments significantly had she written them 15 years later – and she begins to do so in the epilogue (written in 1999) and in *Screening Sex*

(2008). Her work forged an academic path without which this project likely would never have come to fruition, but I expand on Williams' history and analysis of pornography by posing different questions, in order to reframe the issue of the feminist potential of sexual representation. Through a combination of theoretically informed industrial and textual analysis, I offer a revision to the history of moving image pornography with a focus on the contributions of women filmmakers and an assessment of their feminist possibilities.

I was drawn to my subject by an interest in finding out what happens when women – so often discussed exclusively as the object of the pornographic gaze – do the looking, in a cultural form utterly preoccupied with sexual difference. While I was in the midst of working on this project, *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013) was released, comprising an important intervention in the field of pornography studies, by bringing together practitioners and academics to discuss feminist pornography. In so doing, the editors and contributors sidestepped an issue with which I have struggled: the focus on feminist pornography, which is defined by the object rather than its creator and thus can be produced by people of any and all gender identities, allows them to avoid the issue of gender essentialism altogether. For my purposes, I am not defining “women” in heterosexist or transphobic ways, but as a useful if problematic and oversimplified identity category. Women's – indeed, everyone's – identities are multiple, complex, conditional, and intersectional, and I discuss Buck Angel, a “man with a pussy,” as well as genderqueer performers and directors like Jiz Lee and Courtney Trouble, not to impose the label of “woman” on them, but to complicate its definition. In the context of pornographic production and consumption, “women” functions primarily as a discursive

category, invoked for a variety of purposes, ranging from the ideological to the commercial.

Women have, of course, always played a prominent role in the production of adult video as actresses (or “talent,” in industry speak), but actresses do not necessarily have much control over their cinematic representation unless they are also directing and/or co-producing the movies in which they appear. They do not earn residuals or royalties, and are typically paid a one-time fee of roughly \$500-1500 per scene. If they do direct or produce, they tend to have significantly more control over their performances as well as their own celebrity – that is, their off-camera public personae – than do the actresses who are not also directing/producing the films in which they perform. In order to be able to produce or direct, however, it seems that women overwhelmingly must first gain recognition in their work as performers; the women who manage to work as directors/producers in the mainstream adult video industry almost without exception have been able to do so only because they had already achieved name-recognition through performing in adult video, and as their fame increases so does their control in the production of their porn. Many male actors also go on to direct, of course, but a significant number of male directors have not first worked as performers.

Through a series of interviews with women directors and producers, I have learned that women have entered into this role through different channels, and with a variety of motivations. Some seek more power, creative control, and higher salaries; others seek to challenge the status quo, bringing overlooked groups of people, sexualities, sex acts, or body types to light; some seek to prove that they can play the boys’ game better than the boys, to prove that not all women want softness and romance and flowers;

others seek to fund their art-making through their porn or to break down the boundaries between art and porn; still others simply seek to take on a new role in the production of the same sort of porn they've enjoyed starring in.

As producer Veronica Hart puts it, "Any blanket statement about the business is meaningless, [because it's so big that] every conceivable type of person [can be found in it]. You'll find someone who's into it to provide spiritual uplift and educational self-help . . . And if you want to find rotten, vicious, misogynistic bastards – you'll find them."²²

Contrary to common stereotypes, the women I spoke with emerged as a diverse, thoughtful, and frequently quite well-educated group. In a series of thirty-four personal interviews with filmmakers, in addition to several performers, industry commentators, and sex shop proprietors, I've talked to two women with Master's degrees and one with a PhD (and two others who are about to earn honorary PhDs), one woman who graduated from college when she was 19, several women who identify as feminist and/or queer, some who identify as artists and/or activists, several women of color, and a number of women who provide sex education alongside and/or via their porn production.

Royalle in particular has made significant headway in the last two decades in providing other women, such as Abiola Abrams, with opportunities to direct. Both prior to and since directing her first porn film through Royalle's Femme Productions, Abrams has been a mainstream filmmaker, writer and TV host on BET, HBO, and NBC. Her "first foray into sex films explores black women's desires and the politics of their performance in commercial hip-hop."²³ In an interview with Mireille Miller-Young, Abrams explains her motivations: frustrated with "the over-sexualization of young black women in hip-hop and in the greater culture," she wanted to "make a film that is feminist

and empowering and shows positive sexuality, but also at the same time deconstructs and criticizes over-sexualization.”²⁴ Significantly, she chose porn – not Hollywood, not HBO – as her venue for this fundamentally activist creative endeavor. And a female producer, with the stated goal of providing access for other women to leadership roles in pornography, facilitated this.

In a business that explicitly commodifies women’s bodies and thus encourages cutthroat competition between women, these filmmakers have shown me again and again that, against the odds, women in the industry are forming supportive relationships to help one another – and thereby to encourage women’s progress in the industry at large. My research will begin to address the ways in which pornography opens up a space for female authorship, sexual expression, and even blatantly feminist praxis, and to demonstrate the ways in which the porn industry counterintuitively can provide more opportunities for women to have creative control than do mainstream media.

Much as porn can actually provide more opportunities for female filmmakers than more legitimate venues typically do, it can also enable more recognition. Marne Lucas, co-director of the “sexperimental” – or sexually explicit experimental – film *The Operation* (1995), is almost never credited as such by galleries and other exhibition venues.²⁵ Although Lucas collaborated on every level of the production of the film – editing, directing the action, performing – co-director Jacob Pander is typically credited as the sole filmmaker, while Lucas has achieved recognition only for her performance (under the stage name “Gina Velour”). She laments that nobody cared that the director was talent but “everyone wanted to know who Gina Velour was.”²⁶ She attributes this to the sexism endemic to both the art world and US culture at large, in which “women’s art

is seen as confessional.”²⁷ She therefore believes that she has been dismissed as a creator due to her decision to appear in *The Operation*, even as Pander’s decision to do likewise has not had any apparent impact on the critical reception of his filmmaking. This type of oversight also seems to reflect broader societal assumptions about women’s rightful place as objects and men’s as subjects of audiovisual media. The academy has not been immune to such assumptions: P. Adams Sitney discussed filmmaker and performance artist Carolee Schneeman exclusively as a performer and muse for Stan Brakhage, effectively censoring her role as a cultural producer in all but the most recent edition of his highly influential book about the American avant-garde, *Visionary Film*.²⁸

In the porn industry, however, we find a different trend. As it turns out, women are more likely to be given all of the credit for directing their films, even when they are collaborating with a male director. This is a common practice – a number of the women who spoke to me told me that they collaborate with husbands, boyfriends, or partners when they work behind the camera. Speaking about a film for which she is credited as the director, for instance, one filmmaker told me: “Just between us, I only wrote it, and I was the assistant director on it.” The reasons for this sort of singular recognition are, of course, tied to the women’s star power, which, as I’ve already discussed, is not an unproblematic phenomenon. It is precisely because they are so successful at being the objects of porn that they are able to become its subjects. Female performers routinely out-earn their male counterparts, and thus encounter paths of access to directing, but this could not be so without the corresponding phenomenon of industrial assumptions: that men are the primary viewers of porn and that women’s bodies are what they will pay to watch. That does not mean, however, that these women do not deserve recognition as

filmmakers, and one could certainly argue that their excess recognition is preferable to the lack of recognition that filmmakers like Lucas experience.

Furthermore, porn performance should not merely be dismissed as objectification. Many of the filmmakers with whom I spoke describe feeling a strong sense of agency while performing. A number of them expressed at least a slight preference for performing over directing, and clearly feel that they contribute creatively to scenes, even in films for which they are only performers and do not have any sort of official behind-the-camera role. Filmmakers like Jessica Drake and Belladonna, for instance, describe various ways in which the performers (at least those who have achieved a certain amount of star power) run the scenes from within, whether or not they are officially directing them.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu's conceptualizing of hypersexuality in *The Hypersexuality of Race* (2007) provides a useful model for the analysis of different forms of (racialized, sexualized, and gendered) authorship and agency. She analyzes a variety of different cinematic genres – mainstream Hollywood cinema, stag films, adult video, documentary, and independent/experimental feminist film. Of these, only the feminist film and some of the porn are directed by Asian/American²⁹ women, but in every case she discusses the (varying) extents to which the Asian/American actresses contribute to the texts as authors. She acknowledges the limitations with regard to their authorship, and focuses on seemingly miniscule ways in which the women can insert their subjectivities or interpretations into the texts. For instance, in a series of gonzo³⁰ porn titles, *101 Asian Debutantes*, one of the Thai prostitutes who is paid to have sex on camera with the director “negotiates some kind of voice in her performance primarily

through her establishment of a relationship with the camera.”³¹ Shimizu explains that the woman’s (who is identified only as “Number 71” in the film) defiant stare into the camera, which she holds for quite some time, in a sense reverses or returns the objectifying gaze.

In my case studies, I examine the power dynamics in a similar way, analyzing the politics of representation and the extent to which actresses can retain a level of subjectivity and exert a form of authorship over their own scenes, especially when they are also employed as directors. Rather than relying primarily on texts as the basis for my analysis, however, I seek to analyze the ways that the industry talks to and about itself. My project considers a variety of standpoints and imaginaries, each of which produces different perspectives on the phenomenon of women’s agency and authorship as producers and directors of adult video. Through discourse analysis, I will assess the significance of these different perspectives and what they can illuminate for us about the gender politics of the industry. In addition to the words of the women producers and directors themselves, I analyze marketing rhetoric on websites and DVD covers; the positioning of male producers, directors, and performers in interviews and articles; and the perspectives of critics and commentators as they speak about the industry via trade publications and at conventions and awards ceremonies.

Their viewpoints on the same issues sometimes differ dramatically. Most of the filmmakers whose work I examine perform in their own films, and many of them describe how they will direct scenes from within them, often in subtle ways that do not necessarily reveal themselves to casual viewers. Others in the industry – such as a certain white male producer who spoke to me at the 2010 Exxxotica LA porn convention – are

dismissive of female porn stars' directorial prowess in this regard. This producer spoke derisively of the aforementioned over-recognition given to certain female filmmakers who team up with male directors to whom they are typically married or otherwise romantically entangled. He explained how a given studio will highlight the woman as the director on the website and DVD cover as a way to sell videos, but he insisted that in these situations, the man had typically done all of the directing and the woman was the filmmaker in name only. The logic, as he and others have explained it to me, is that porn viewers (assumed to be straight males) want to watch their favorite porn stars' fantasies played out, and if a porn star directs a video, the video is marketed as her vision – that is, the enactment of her fantasies. In other words, he insisted that studios exploit porn stars' names as a brand even if the women have no directing abilities to speak of, and indeed even if they didn't actually do the directing at all.

When I spoke to some of the women whose films were marketed as their own but were (according to industry insiders) supposedly directed by their husbands, however, I found that they may in fact have ways of directing that don't register for their critics. Belladonna, for instance, told me: "I basically have the entire idea for the movie, and I have all these visions, but I don't know how to get them done. So [my husband] comes in and he shoots the camera, and we sit down and we think about all the shots we want to get [...] and then we become a team."³² She further explained that, in addition to generating the original concepts for the films, she would direct the action from within a scene in which she was also performing: "I actually find it easier to kind of direct in a scene without directing – just being in the scene."³³ In talking dirty to the other performer(s), for instance, she'll spontaneously let both the performer(s) and her husband

know how the scene will play out, without stopping to interrupt the scene. The extent to which this can be validated as directing by the patriarchal structure of the industry is open for debate, but Belladonna herself clearly believes that she retains creative control and exerts her own creative vision in her films. I read this as a significant, if restricted, form of agency.

In such a patriarchally organized industry, women's agency cannot but be restricted, but my project seriously considers the feminist possibilities for women achieving any measure of creative control in pornographic filmmaking. In her forthcoming book, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in American Pornography*, Mireille Miller-Young applies Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency as a way to consider the forms and amounts of power available to black women working as porn actresses. In *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, using her ethnographic work on Egyptian women in the mosque movement³⁴ as the basis for her analysis, Mahmood argues that human agency is not limited to actions that challenge social norms. Instead, it is "entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms."³⁵ Following Foucault, Butler, and other thinkers, Mahmood explores possibilities for agency beyond resistance to relations of domination, as a capacity for action that can be created and enabled within conditions of subordination. She argues that norms "are not only consolidated and/or subverted... but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways,"³⁶ and as such envisions agency as more of a continuum than an absolute. Following Miller-Young, I apply this concept in order to shift the frame for envisioning women in pornography: although women filmmakers in the porn industry must always function within a fundamentally

patriarchal and often oppressive system, and all women filmmakers in America function within the patriarchal and often oppressive society at large, they nonetheless can enact various forms of agency, even through the inhabiting of cultural norms. Unlike Miller-Young's, my project is not primarily an ethnography, although I do employ ethnographic methods. In addition to production studies methodologies and contextual analysis, I incorporate textual analysis in order to assess the implications and outcomes of the filmmakers' creative agency, standpoints, personal politics, and production practices, as manifested in their work.

Women filmmakers describe a variety of strategies that they use either as direct capacities for political action or to exert subtler and more personal forms of agency, in the creation of sexually explicit cinema. Shimizu's notion of "politically productive perversity" – "identifying with 'bad' images, or working to establish a different identity along with established sexual images so as to expand racial agendas beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization" – in *The Hypersexuality of Race* is particularly useful in considering some of the forms of agency that women filmmakers, and especially performer-directors, in the porn industry (as well as the women who make sex films outside of it) can enact.³⁷

The term can refer to a filmmaker's intentional or politicized usage of "bad images," for instance, in the work of Machiko Saito, one of the feminist filmmakers discussed by Shimizu. Her work, such as *Premenstrual Spotting* (1997) expresses both the pain and the pleasures intrinsic to and facilitated by sexual expression. It can also refer to more typical examples of the porn genre, such as Tristan Taormino's *Chemistry* (2008), which includes stereotypical images and ideas only to undermine them in later

scenes. In *Chemistry*, Mr. Marcus, a black actor, is depicted as a soulful lover (to the tune of Marvin Gaye) with, of course, an extra large penis, but in a “confessional” segment, in which he is asked to discuss his experiences in the industry, he comments on racialized assumptions and prejudices in the industry, and specifically mentions the economic imperatives that limit opportunities for performers of color and encourage the replication of stereotypical and racist images. In this way, the film leads with a stereotype, only to challenge the structures – both economic and socio-cultural – that have produced it. As Shimizu uses it, politically productive perversity can also be used to recuperate problematic images designed outside of any sort of critical or deconstructive framework, as in the case of Number 71’s reversal of the gaze in *101 Asian Debutantes*. In my second chapter, I focus quite a bit on filmmakers whose work would fall into this category, in order to assess the feminist potential of so-called “extreme” porn.

Politically productive perversity might also describe the choice to focus academic work on pornography as a valid form of cultural expression; to acknowledge both the pleasures and the dangers, as well as the political potential of sexual imagery that moves beyond stereotypes in some sense, even if it also seems to embrace or exploit them. Because women, and women of color in particular, are so often spoken for through sex, Shimizu argues, we must “speak *in* sex in order to provide an untangling from as well as an embrace of the binds of hypersexuality and representation”³⁸ (emphasis mine). In addition to providing a certain justification for an academic focus on problematic texts and phenomena, the idea of politically productive perversity also enables a way of examining intersectionality in pornographic film and video.

Shimizu's focus is overwhelmingly on representations of Asian/American women in film, although she insists that the concept of politically productive perversity can be expanded to include all forms of racialized representations. I will apply the term to focus on the ways in which people of various races and ethnicities both exert agency and are represented in porn directed by women. Because whiteness is privileged in both pornographic representation and the industry that creates it, most of the filmmakers whose work I discuss are white. Although whiteness typically goes unmarked in American culture at large, in porn it often does not – at least not when it is used to highlight, through juxtaposition, the fetishization of racial stereotypes – and I recognize and critique racial privilege in conjunction with my analysis of the gender politics of the porn industry.

Like Shimizu, my account will include feminist and experimental filmmakers whose work is sexually explicit, alongside work created within the porn industry proper, and I consider the ways in which women filmmakers' work – and the larger structures in which it functions and circulates – is discussed by critics and industry insiders, most importantly the women themselves. To that end, when speaking to filmmakers and other industry insiders, I tailored the inquiries to my subject, but I always posed a core series of questions: when and how did they first get into working in porn, and when and how did they transition into directing? Do they identify as feminist? Do they see their work as feminist? Do they have specific production practices that they employ in order to ensure the safety and comfort of their performers? What are their target market demographics? Do they think that their gender has affected their career in any way, positively or negatively? How do they describe or categorize their work?

The terms that filmmakers use to describe their work belie a multitude of assumptions, politics, and motivations. Pornography has been approached and understood in a variety of ways. Traditionally, porn and erotica have been distinguished through their associations with masculine and feminine sensibilities, respectively. Many filmmakers embrace the term “pornography,” but some do not. Some women, such as Candida Royalle, describe their work as “erotica.” Others, like Abiola Abrams, sidestep the dichotomy by describing their work as “sex films,” or, like Carolee Schneeman, by referring to their work simply as film or art, or refusing to categorize it altogether. The politics of naming are complex. Some women embrace the term pornography because they have never thought to question it, or because they see no point in mincing words, but others embrace it specifically to resist the gendered assumptions about taste and desire that underlie the associations between women and erotica and men and pornography. The women who refuse the term pornography similarly do so for a myriad of reasons – to differentiate their work from the negative connotations of pornography as misogynist, exploitative, and/or debased; or to distinguish their art from profit-driven commercial endeavors, in light of the broadly held cultural assumption that art and pornography are mutually exclusive.

In many ways the categories of pornography and erotica are increasingly collapsing into one another. As the actual sex in hardcore film and video tends to be rather mundane and predictable compared to the rhetoric used to sell and describe it, women’s print erotica grows increasingly explicit and hardcore despite its insistence on defining itself as “not-porn.” In *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (1998), Jane Juffer argues that the very term “erotica” works to legitimize the

material by distinguishing itself from crass, supposedly inartistic pornography (either term can describe print or visual media), and thereby makes it more accessible to women, whose sexuality continues to remain stigmatized and problematic in public discourses. In addition to providing a theoretical framework for the idea of the pornographic (vs. the erotic), her book constitutes a useful model for engaging with women as producers and consumers of sexually explicit materials. The choice of how to label one's work has political implications but, for my purposes, it is productive to apply the term "pornographic" to all of the work that I discuss, regardless of any given filmmakers' preferred terms.

The binary that distinguishes between the pornographic and erotic, usually (if implicitly) in gendered and classist terms, is misleading and, for my purposes, unproductive. Audre Lorde, in her 1984 article, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," argues that the pornographic is the "opposite" of the erotic, and that "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."³⁹ She defines the erotic as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction."⁴⁰ Without diminishing the power and significance of her intervention, which strives to open up a space for women's, and specifically lesbians', enjoyment of sexual images outside of a patriarchal sexual economy, I insist that viewers – including women – can and do experience a chaos of strong feelings and a sense of satisfaction from watching hardcore pornography. The sense of satisfaction derived from the viewing of hardcore porn may (or may not) be more physical and less emotional than the reaction that Lorde describes, but as our experience of the world and others' perceptions of us are

necessarily embodied, we ought to acknowledge that affect is also experienced as such. Furthermore, the distinction between pornography and erotica serves to reinforce othering tendencies; as Linda Williams suggests in *Hard Core*, it “ends up setting the seemingly authentic, acceptable (erotic or soft-core) sex of the self against the inauthentic and unacceptable (pornographic, violent, or obscene) sex of the ‘other.’”⁴¹

Some filmmakers nonetheless seek to dissociate their work from the tendencies of pornography that they find problematic or unsavory. A staunch supporter of women’s right to sexual self-expression, MM Serra identifies as an artist first and foremost, and defines pornography by distinguishing it from art or experimental film through its commercial objectives, as cinema that is designed “to make money.”⁴² The disavowal of the pornographic, as in the case of Candida Royalle’s and Abiola Abrams’s work, is often strategic, and signals a filmmaker’s sex positivity and/or artistic motivations. When discussing their work in academic and critical contexts, such as Royalle in the anthology *Feminism and Pornography* and Abrams in *Spread Magazine*, they describe their work as erotica, even as their films are distributed to adult video stores, marketed as “porn for women and couples” and sold alongside hardcore texts. These filmmakers understandably want to distinguish between their own work and much of commercial pornography, including the unabashedly masculinist and (widely decried as misogynist) work of, say, Max Hardcore.

Outside the realm of pornography, most commentators would agree that some filmmaking is feminist, and some is misogynist; some is artistic and some is cynically commercial; but, in the end, all are recognized as examples of the same medium. So while I respect individual filmmakers’ rights to classify their work however they so

choose, and understand their reasons for so doing, I will not eschew the term pornographic in describing films with hardcore content because they happen to be feminist, sex-positive, or artistic – any more than critics or academics would eschew the word “cinematic” in describing Jane Campion’s work because of her desire to create feminist alternatives to the output of the historically male-dominated Hollywood film industry. Suggesting that pornography cannot be feminist, sex-positive, or artistic reinforces the marginalization not only of a type of film text or mode of production but also of all people employed in the creation of it. Because porn performers⁴³ are perceived as sex workers as well as actors, this marginalization can have a devastating impact on one’s life, both during and after a career in porn: where one can find work, how one is treated by one’s family or romantic/sexual partners, how one is represented in mass media outlets, and so on.

The pornographic, as I use it here, refers to texts that include the types of content that could be deemed obscene, and as such are routinely censored from Hollywood cinema. Although I sidestep entirely the issue of censorship, focusing not on whether or not it should exist but rather how it does exist, the pornographic is in effect a legal definition, as well as one centered on the relationship between authenticity and performance, between “the real” and the representation. My designation of “pornographic” does not, however, imply anything about a film’s purpose(s) or filmmaker’s intentions. Unlike movies that fit comfortably within the genre of pornography, sexperimental films may not be designed to arouse the spectator. Several of the sexperimental filmmakers who spoke with me about their work (seemingly unconsciously) moved back and forth between using and disavowing “porn” or

“pornographic” to describe their work. MM Serra, for instance, distinguishes between her work and pornography, because she has no interest in “marketing or branding” and her work is not commercial; at the same time, she told me that when she first met Jennifer Reeves (with whom she made the film *Darling International* in 1999) at MoMA, she approached Reeves to say, “I’m interested in doing a porn film with you.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Marne Lucas described the film that she co-created with Jacob Pander, *The Operation*, as “art porn,” but when I specifically asked if she would describe her film as pornography, she said, “I don’t really think of it as pornography.”⁴⁵ This ambivalence gestures toward the culturally established dichotomy that suggests that if a film is art, it cannot also be porn, about which Lucas adds, “I realize it’s an explicit, sci fi, patient/surgeon scenario, but I really think it’s an art film.”⁴⁶

Serra refers to filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh with *Color of Love* (1994) and Abigail Child with *Mayhem* (Part 6 of *Is This What You Were Born For?*, 1987) as “transform[ing] something that was porn into something else.”⁴⁷ When I asked Lucas how she would define pornography, however, she specified that the purpose or intent of a film (i.e. whether or not it is designed to arouse) is key, and added that “our film is definitely in the classification of pornography; it’s meant to arouse and titillate, but there’s so much going on to look at other than that, other than just two people having sex,”⁴⁸ suggesting that while *The Operation* might be described as pornographic, it is also *more* than porn. In this framework, art and the pornographic may well coexist, even if the vast majority of commercial pornography could easily be described as artless.

I believe that Serra’s definition and mine are not dissimilar; where we differ is a matter of semantics. Rather than relinquish it completely to phallogentric forms of

representation and production cultures, I would like to reclaim the term “pornographic,” as feminist pornographers have done before me, in order to break down its gendered associations with a masculinist industry. In line with reclamations of other terms (such as “queer”) with historically negative associations used to describe marginalized texts, populations, or identities, the concept of the pornographic can be a site of empowerment for sex radical cultural producers seeking to reclaim and revise sexual representation of diverse bodies, sexualities, and sex acts. By discussing sexperimental films within the context of a broader study of women filmmakers creating pornography, I do not mean to impose an unwanted term on individual filmmakers’ work, especially since they may have had that term used against them as a way to dismiss their artistic achievements.⁴⁹ Instead, I seek to consider the productive avenues of discussion that can emerge from considering overlaps and intersections between these disparate modes of film production, and to question both the idea that pornography is a clearly defined category and the related notion that a tangible or objective division exists between the pornographic and the erotic.

Pornography has been discussed most often as an industry, located predominantly in California’s San Fernando Valley, and as a genre, as outlined by Linda Williams in *Hard Core*. In examining avant-garde films as well, however, I am proposing the adoption of the notion of the pornographic as a broader definitional category. Even when their films are created in a primarily aesthetic rather than commercial context, what pornographers and sexperimental filmmakers are doing in their work has important similarities. Partly to emphasize affinities to other (overtly adult) production cultures, partly to contribute to the deconstruction of the problematically gendered binaries

elaborated above, and partly because I am not interested in replicating negative connotations, I have made a conscious choice to use the word “pornographic,” rather than “obscene” or the less politically charged “hardcore.” As I use the term, a film may be pornographic and yet function primarily to deconstruct rather than promote pleasure.

Though the films’ primary intents – to titillate or to provoke thought – may differ, both commercial pornography and sexperimental film constitute important forms of sexual self-expression. In meaningful ways, both pornography and sexperimental film seek to revise male-directed, masculinist visions of women’s sexuality, and often to convey autobiographical, or what I call “auto-pornographic,”⁵⁰ impulses – either through the confessional mode of sexperimental film or through the conveying of a porn filmmaker’s (supposedly) personal fantasies. I use “auto-pornographic” to refer to a mode of production in which a filmmaker inserts her sexualized body and/or her sexual subjectivity into her film text. In order to consider the productive ways in which sexperimental film and pornography can function both to arouse and to critique, I have developed and employed the concept of “critical arousal.”⁵¹ Critical arousal acknowledges that these functions – intellectual and sexual stimulation – are not mutually exclusive and can indeed be complementary.

Both types of filmmaking can also function as a form of therapy; sexperimental filmmakers and pornographers occasionally employ self-help discourses to explain how working with sexual images can be liberating and transformational. Sexperimental filmmaker Anne Hanavan describes her auto-pornographic filmmaking as an “outlet” for dealing with “a really dark period” in her life⁵²; queer porn performer/director Courtney Trouble similarly describes feminist porn production as “self-empowering.”⁵³ Trouble

also speaks to the potential of these images to serve the same sort of function for viewers of their work: “Each positive image can break down a few moments of shame, pain, or self hatred.”⁵⁴ In so doing, some films utilize critical arousal, and others disregard or resist arousal altogether. For instance, Annie Sprinkle told me that, with each of the hardcore films that she directed after *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, she had “set out to do more of a sexually explicit film that wasn’t necessarily erotic. It was a deconstruction, or about sex but not meant to turn people on. [...] People say, ‘Oh, well, that wasn’t sexy.’ Well, it wasn’t meant to be.”⁵⁵

In this way, I seek to intervene in the ways that pornography has traditionally been understood and discussed. Focusing on women filmmakers challenges simplistic ways of understanding of pornography, as either victimizing or empowering, as an institution designed by and for men, or as a collection of texts or a genre rather than an industry. The methodology of industrial analysis allows me to challenge notions of pornography as a form of “low culture” entirely lacking in artistic or intellectual merit. The idea of pornography, or indeed of any moving image involving hardcore sexual activity, as antithetical to art is a tough notion to resist in the popular imaginary, but by including a chapter on experimental film, by exploring the various intersections between the art world, the porn world, and the academy, and by taking seriously women filmmakers’ aesthetic concerns and motivations, I will attempt to do so here.

Women filmmakers’ authorship is valid and worthy of study, regardless of the type of cinema that they create. A number of books focusing on women filmmakers provide useful overviews and analyses of women filmmakers’ contributions to film history.⁵⁶ These texts provide models for historicizing both women’s production of films

and the reception of women's films (that is, films addressed to women), but I will intervene in the project of recuperation and expansion by adding to the conversation that which has been left out of previous discussions of women filmmakers: women pornographers' contributions to film history. I place the work of female pornographers in conversation with that of acclaimed feminist filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh and Abigail Child, revealing significant intersections and overlaps between Hollywood, independent and experimental film, activist and educational spheres, the art world, and the porn industry.

These intersections are multiple and significant. Honey Lee's lesbian porn production in the late 1960s and early 1970s was subsidized by San Francisco State University, where she was enrolled as a graduate student. The career of Abiola Abrams, a TV producer and pornographer, exemplifies the connections between Hollywood and porn. Experimental filmmaker and video artist Margie Schnibbe, nee Vena Virago – director of alt-porn titles such as *Honey Bunny* (2008) – embodies one example of the junctures between the art world and the porn world.⁵⁷ And, although Lizzie Borden is best known for *Working Girls* (1986) – a feminist film about sex work – some readers may be surprised to learn that there is in fact also a porn filmmaker by the name of Lizzy Borden. What's in a name? In an industry in which taking on a nom de porn (and an accompanying persona) is par for the course, quite a bit. The existence of a pornified Lizzy Borden may be mere coincidence, but I believe it is symbolic of the above-mentioned intersections. The filmmakers whose work I will examine are overwhelmingly smarter and shrewder than popular misconceptions will allow, and even

if Ms. Borden is unaware of her feminist forebear, her motivations for adopting the name of the famous murderess are doubtless equally complex.

Linda Williams, in her more recent work, has examined some of the intersections between pornography and the avant-garde. In *Screening Sex*, for instance, she considers all manner of sex films – Hollywood, art cinema, and independent film – as well as returning to the subject of pornography. She expands her discussion by acknowledging the influence of the avant-garde, including Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963). In this context she acknowledges that the porn genre might have developed differently, under different circumstances. Whereas most public discourse tends to ghettoize pornography – most often as a blight on society that ought to be censored or outright eradicated – a more nuanced understanding of the realities of the production and consumption of pornography can be achieved through considering porn as part of a larger phenomenon of cinematic depictions of sex.

This is, in part, why I discuss experimental films in concert with pornography. But a still greater understanding might be achieved through production studies methodologies. I attempt to accomplish this first by giving greater voice to the individuals working in the industry. Additionally, as textual analysis alone cannot account for the various factors that encompass the creation and consumption of pornography, I examine the socioeconomic conditions of production, distribution, and reception. Rather than exclusively quoting published interviews with producers, directors, and stars, which tend to be promotional in nature, I cite my own interviews with women directors, and employ discourse analysis to get at the assumptions and motivations that underlie self-representation and industry praxis.

In order to examine the gender politics of the industry and the experiences of the women who work within it as cultural producers, I also employ various additional forms of industrial analysis, including an examination of trade publications like *Adult Video News* (and the rhetoric of industry conventions utilized therein), as well as analysis of marketing discourse and extratextual materials, such as advertisements and DVD covers; all of which will allow me to ascertain the ways in which the producers speak to and about themselves. A rigorous assessment of the actual reception of the films – who actually watches/prefers which kinds of texts or specific texts – would involve additional sociological methods and is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I focus on marketing discourses and the filmmakers' claims about their target audiences in order to get a sense of whom they expect or hope is watching their films, and the ways in which this guides their artistic decisions.

Situating pornographic and sexperimental filmmakers and their contributions within the history of feminist filmmaking in the US, the history of pornographic filmmaking in the US, and the various socio-cultural contexts that have informed their experiences and their cultural production, I assess the political potential of pornographic filmmaking praxis and of the texts themselves. To that end, I consider economic imperatives, including the relative profitability of marketing to straight men vs. marketing to straight women and couples vs. marketing to queer viewers.⁵⁸ I also examine the relevance of technological developments, including the advents of video and the Internet, both of which have made pornography more accessible to women in terms of both production and consumption. To enable my analysis of the feminist potential of these filmmakers' contributions, my argument is also informed by feminist film theory,

especially with regard to women's roles as cultural producers and the subject/object binary that has accompanied discussions thereof, as well as by critical race theory, queer theory, genre studies, and cultural studies.

Films created within a given production culture, be it the mainstream porn industry or the avant-garde, and distributed/exhibited accordingly are more likely to share certain characteristics – for instance, in terms of target audience and style – than are films from different production cultures. As such, I group the films and filmmakers according to their relationships to the dominant porn industry, although I complicate this taxonomy throughout by acknowledging the overlaps and intersections among the different production contexts and by referring to some filmmakers' (like Tristan Taormino, Madison Young, and Maria Beatty) work across multiple chapters.

My first chapter focuses on women working outside of the industry, making “sexperimental film” within the art world or the avant-garde; my second chapter deals with women working within the mainstream porn industry; and my third chapter deals primarily with women working on the fringes of the industry, in the production of porn featuring lesbian, bisexual, and queer sex acts, performers, and sexual expression, and marketed via alternative distribution channels to primarily queer viewers. My fourth and final chapter, however, addresses a form of pornography that cannot easily be extracted from discussions of either the mainstream or the margins of porn production: alt-porn.

Alt-porn, or alternative pornography, exists on a broad spectrum but, on its most basic level, features nontraditional-looking performers and tends to highlight nonmainstream subcultures. As I elaborate in Chapter 4, this may simply involve dark-haired actresses with tattoos and small breasts, in lieu of the surgically enhanced blondes

more typical of the genre, or it may involve actual attempts to subvert porn conventions or aesthetics on a formal or narrative level, to challenge porn production paradigms, or to convey blatantly political sensibilities. As such, depending on who's talking about it, alt-porn may encompass queer porn, like the films of Courtney Trouble, or porn – like the films of Joanna Angel – with mainstream distribution marketed primarily to straight men. Many of the texts and filmmakers discussed in this chapter presented significant difficulties for me, as I considered how or where to categorize them. The differences between queer porn and straight porn are significant, but I am equally interested in their affinities. Difficulties with categorization may present a challenge by complicating my ability to separate out different types of pornography, but they also present a fruitful avenue of investigation, for thinking about the complex relationships that women filmmakers have with the production of sexual imagery, with one another, with different forms of agency, and with American culture at large.

The will to authenticity constitutes a throughline among all of my chapters, as sexperimental filmmakers and pornographers alike demonstrate different types of investments in the concept. I do not take filmmakers' claims for authenticity at face value, but I take care to analyze and attempt to locate them within their texts, as their conceptions of authenticity can expose affinities between and among the underlying concerns and motivations behind women's pornographic cultural production. Sexperimental filmmakers tend to value the authenticity of one's subject position and its relationship to desire; that is, a film's ability to convey genuine female (and/or racialized) sexuality and/or genuinely feminist concerns. Feminist pornographers are equally concerned with this form of authenticity, as are some mainstream pornographers, but

pornography has additional investments. As Linda Williams points out in *Hard Core*, pornography has codified its obsession with authenticity through the ubiquity of external ejaculation (or the “money shot”) as proof of male sexual pleasure. Although some women can also ejaculate, pornography has mostly sought other ways to convey female pleasure. In these instances, it is the *performance* of pleasure that matters: enthusiasm as authenticity.

Performance similarly functions as authenticity in depictions of BDSM and consensual explorations of fantasies of nonconsent. Both fetish and mainstream porn paradoxically locate authenticity in their ability to convey fantasies of violence and nonconsent through believable, consensual performances of actual physical violence: a woman who is really tied up, whipped, and beaten, for instance, but within the fantasy framework of a BDSM scene (rather than a genuinely nonconsensual encounter). In fetish film, performers’ genuine associations with and participation in real-world BDSM scenes assert an additional layer of authenticity, in opposition to mainstream porn’s supposedly casual, touristic relationships with kink. Bound up (as it were) with this form of authenticity is the issue of consent, and the implications of the performance thereof versus the actual consent that a performer gives by agreeing to participate in a scene, signing a contract, and accepting payment. Feminist pornographers, for instance, often take care to document consent within the diegesis of their films as part of their political investment in ethical porn production. In addition to prioritizing ethical production practices that go beyond the obtainment of consent to emphasize performer comfort and safety, they strive to demonstrate the authenticity of the performers’ consent and desires on-screen; that is, to show viewers, through the *performance* of consent (for instance, in

confessional scenes in which performers discuss their fantasies, safe words, etc., to contextualize and justify rough or kinky sex scenes,)), that the performers not only have agreed to participate but, in so doing, are enacting their own genuine desires.

In order to differentiate their work from the mainstream, queer, lesbian/dyke, and feminist pornographies tend to position their work as authentic on several levels: in terms of their relationship to identity politics and specific communities, their depictions of supposedly authentic women's pleasure (rather than merely the appearance thereof), the diverse appearances and identities of their performers (as "real" women or "real" queers, in opposition to the conventionally attractive, bi-for-pay women of mainstream porn), and their activist motivations (as authentically queer, feminist, etc.). Alt-porn filmmakers tend to assert their work as authentic in relation to subcultural communities, like punk or Goth, and/or to artistic sensibilities.

Another concept that finds its way into all of these forms of pornographic production, but especially the non-mainstream incarnations, is that of experimentation, either sexual or artistic or both. The idea of experimentation relates to authenticity primarily through the presumption of spontaneity – regardless of how contrived an experiment may be, the framing of a performance as a "first" or an "experiment" is suggestive of improvisation. Mainstream pornography typically involves a systematic form of sexual experimentation, in that women performers are encouraged by managers, agents, and producers to follow a trajectory of "firsts" in their on-screen work, which are then marketed as such: often beginning with girl-on-girl scenes, then experimenting with their first boy/girl scene, and moving on to anal scenes, double penetration, interracial sex, group scenes, and so on. Taormino's feminist yet mainstream *Chemistry* series (the

first of which is subtitled “an experiment”), positions itself as an experiment in feminist praxis as well as a forum for sexual experimentation. Courtney Trouble’s queer porn film, *Seven Minutes in Heaven 1: Coming Out* (2009), similarly features performers who express their willingness to experiment on camera with sex acts and partners that they had not previously tried or considered in their personal lives. Most sexperimental film and alt-porn (and the occasional queer or mainstream porn film) involve formal or aesthetic experimentation, as well as the types of sexual experimentation that regularly occur across the spectrum of pornographic production.

As my methodology will include contextual and historical analysis, my argument will roughly follow an historical trajectory, beginning with the avant-garde because Barbara Rubin’s hard core experimental film *Christmas on Earth* precedes the legal public exhibition of pornography by nearly a decade. I will subsequently address the mainstream industry, followed by the chapter on lesbian, queer, and feminist pornography, as it is a more recent development, having gained significant distribution and recognition since the late ‘80s – with broad recognition symbolized by the lesbian-produced feature *Hard Love/How to Fuck in High Heels* winning an AVN Award (aka “porn Oscar”) in 2001. My final chapter will address the still more recent phenomenon of alt-porn, which initially developed online in the late 1990s, and was co-opted by mainstream studios like VCA/Hustler and Vivid in 2004.

Among the questions that these chapters seek to answer are: what happens when women create sexually explicit moving images? What do these images look like and how have they been represented or categorized, both by the filmmakers themselves and by critics/consumers? How should we categorize these women’s experiences? How do

assumptions about target audiences influence the content of film texts? Does access to agency and creative control for women of color filmmakers differ markedly from that of their white counterparts? How are race, gender, class, and sexuality configured in pornography created by women? I will also address what the women filmmakers' paths of access have been; their audiences, both intended and actual; where and when the porn industry's world collides with the art world and/or other industries; and what these women's careers can tell us about these industries and modes of production.

So, to return to the example with which we began, what can the porn *Avengers* tell us about the industry? Just as porn is Hollywood's shadow industry, the film is a shadow self to Joss Whedon's far more well known adaptation of the comics franchise. As such it encapsulates in many ways (despite not having been directed by a woman) what's at stake for women in pornography, in terms of the politics of representation. The objectification of women that fuels most pornography production paradoxically also empowers women. It does so in a variety of ways: there are more major roles for women in porn than in Hollywood; porn actresses are, on average, considerably higher wage earners than porn actors; because of the branding that stardom enables, women can find more and easier avenues of access to leadership roles as producers and directors in the porn industry than in Hollywood.⁵⁹

As I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapters, this type of access and empowerment are embedded within and constrained by corporatized capitalist markets, and we should not conflate neoliberal notions of individual economic success with broader, collectivist feminist politics. Beyond that, we cannot ignore the phenomenon that enables these individual women's forms of access: women's (typically young, white,

slender, able, large-breasted) bodies are the primary source of currency in pornography. All of these forms of empowerment are contingent on women having and maintaining a particular, largely unattainable, and not unproblematic type of appearance; and are motivated by the objectification, and frequently also various forms of exploitation, of women. Indeed, the same woman can be or seem both empowered and exploited in the same production. This complex and productive tension between porn's potential to empower and to exploit women is at the heart of the analysis in the chapters that follow. Porn is not an either/or proposition; it is both/and – both empowering and exploitative, both cutthroat and supportive, both different from and similar to several different culture industries and modes of production. For me, as a scholar and a viewing subject, it is also both fascinating and repellant.

As I watched the bodies of work – and working bodies – that form the basis of my argument, I frequently felt alternately underwhelmed, bored, and turned off, and occasionally I was outright offended; but sometimes I felt what they wanted me to feel. And then there were the moments that reminded me of why this project matters to me in the first place, when I felt downright elated at the surprising ways in which certain films challenge gender, sexual, and racial norms, or incorporate radical formal or artistic experiments, or make blatant progressive political statements – and every so often, they manage to do so without being pedantic, and without compromising the intention to arouse. And finally, my reactions to or judgments of specific titles are beside the point. Like the multitude of different people who comprise it, porn – as industry and mode of production – is not monolithic. In this project, therefore, I seek not to categorize it definitively nor to decide whether it is ultimately more empowering or more exploitative

for women, but rather to begin to understand its many complexities, and to examine the nuances of the opportunities that it affords to the women whose ideas, work, and perspectives grace the following pages.

¹ Quoted in: Rick Marshall, “An Exclusive look at The Avengers XXX: A Porn Parody Trailer,” April 23, 2010, accessed June 2, 2012, <http://io9.com/5904205/an-exclusive-look-at-the-avengers-xxx-a-porn-parody-trailer>.

² The test was popularized by Alison Bechdel's comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in a 1985 strip called *The Rule*, August, 2005, accessed June 2, 2012, <http://alisonbechdel.blogspot.com/2005/08/rule.html>.

³ I will elaborate on this in Chapter 2, but it is universally acknowledged by producers and industry publications (such as *Adult Video News* and *XBiz*) that female performers' rates are higher than males'. Only a few male performers, such as James Deen, earn anything close to the rates of female stars.

⁴ In the sex wars, feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon argued that pornography was not only exploitative but also an enactment of violence against women, and as such should be banned through legal sanctions. On the other end of the spectrum, feminists like Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia tended to frame porn as a potential source of pleasure and empowerment for women and to argue that porn deserves First Amendment protections. This still stands as one of few issues on which the religious right and radical feminists found themselves on the same side.

⁵ David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 337.

⁶ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 (1989)), 62. Williams adds, however, that it "seems doubtful" that it is the earliest, or even the earliest extant, stag, because private collectors may well have earlier examples.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin, *Dirty Movies: An Illustrated History of the Stag Film, 1915-1970* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), 26.

⁹ This is perhaps even more accurate in more recent pornography, as the men in the majority of adult video appear essentially as disembodied torsos. We generally see all of the woman's body, including her face, and we hear her moaning and speaking. We get at most a few grunts out of the man, who is seemingly there only to provide the all-important appendage, with which male viewers can identify and which ensures a heterosexual paradigm.

¹⁰ Quoted in Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 134.

¹¹ Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 39.

¹² See, for instance, Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Owl Books, 2005); Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007); Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); and William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009). Interestingly, not one but two of

these books use anti-terrorist rhetoric (“hijack”) to describe pornography’s effects. In a particularly egregious example of this concept pervading popular culture, a young man becomes addicted to pornography and thus unable to perform sexually with his girlfriend, in an episode of *CSI: Miami* (“Innocent,” 2.24, 2004). As a result he kills his favorite porn star. When Lt. Horatio Caine (played by David Caruso) arrests the producer of said porn star’s films for separate charges, the producer balks, and insists that he is “not the bad guy here,” because he hadn’t killed anyone. Caine replies, dramatically, “No, but you created the bad guy.”

¹³ Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography*, 39.

¹⁸ Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 99.

¹⁹ Fisting is a sex act in which one or more fists are used for vaginal or anal penetration.

²⁰ For more on this, see Lynn Comella, “From Text to Context: Feminist Porn and the Making of a Market,” in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, Ed. Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Mireille Miller-Young, and Tristan Taormino (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 79-96.

²¹ See, for instance: Pamela Church Gibson, ed., *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (New York: BFI Publishing, 1993); Pamela Church Gibson, ed., *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power* (New York: BFI, 2004); James Elias et al.,

eds., *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); Johannes Grenzfurthner, Günther Friesinger, and Daniel Fabry, eds., *Pronnovation: Pornography and Technological Innovation* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2007); Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Peter Lehman, ed., *Pornography: Film and Culture* (Chapel Hill: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

²² Frank Rich, “Naked Capitalists,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2001.

²³ Mireille Miller-Young, “AfroDite Superstar: Abiola Abrams’ Hip-Hop Alt Porn” (Interview), *\$pread* 5.1 (Summer 2009), 44.

²⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵ “Sexperimental film” is a term coined by Ara Osterweil to describe sexually explicit experimental films. Filmmakers Kadet and Texas also used the term as the title of a compilation of their experimental video work in 2013.

²⁶ Marne Lucas, interview by author, phone recording, January 21, 2009.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde: 1943-1978*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Originally published in 1974, the text has subsequently been revised twice. The second edition was published in 1979. Schneeman is not addressed as a filmmaker in her own right – and then only in a brief mention – until the third edition (which covers the years 1943-2000) in 2002.

²⁹ I follow Shimizu in using “Asian/American” to refer to Asian and Asian-American women.

³⁰ Gonzo is a subgenre of porn, encompassing any pornographic film or video which is (supposedly) unscripted and impromptu, and in which the filmmaker/cinematographer is featured on screen (that is, his/her voice or hand, or entire body, is depicted in the film) and often participates in the action.

³¹ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 207.

³² Belladonna, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, August 3, 2010.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ According to Mahmood, the mosque movement's primary objective is to recapture the pious sensibility that views Islam as integral to women's daily life through the re-integration of various forms of Islamic knowledge and practice.

³⁵ Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15.

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 21.

³⁸ Ibid., 207.

³⁹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 570.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 571.

⁴¹ Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 6.

⁴² MM Serra, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations," *Counter Culture, Counter Cinema: An Avant-Garde Film Festival* (Program 5), co-curated by David E. James and

MM Serra, programmed from the collection of The New American Cinema Group/The Film-Makers' Cooperative (October 16, 2010).

⁴³ Because the majority of women porn directors are also performers, this phenomenon touches the lives of many of the women whose work and perspectives I discuss here.

⁴⁴ MM Serra, interview by author, phone recording, March 9, 2014.

⁴⁵ Marne Lucas, interview.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ MM Serra, interview.

⁴⁸ Marne Lucas, interview.

⁴⁹ As I will discuss below, filmmakers like MM Serra have encountered hostility to their work based on its sexual explicitness.

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Kathleen McHugh for helping me to formulate this term to describe this concept.

⁵¹ I am grateful to Kathleen McHugh for helping me to formulate this term to describe this concept as well.

⁵² Anne Hanavan, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations," *Counter Culture, Counter Cinema: An Avant-Garde Film Festival* (Program 5), co-curated by David E. James and MM Serra, programmed from the collection of The New American Cinema Group/The Film-Makers' Cooperative, (October 16, 2010).

⁵³ Courtney Trouble, "Porn's New Key Words" (Closing Keynote), *The 2nd Annual Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, (April 6, 2014).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Annie Sprinkle, interview by author, phone recording, January 22, 2014.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Alison Butler's monograph, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), Kathleen McHugh's article, "The World and the Soup: Historicizing Feminisms in Transnational Contexts" (*Camera Obscura* 24 no. 3 72, 2009), and the following edited volumes: Robin Blaetz, ed., *Women's Experimental Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (Los Angeles: AFI Press, 1998); and Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul, eds., *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ See page 311 for a definition of alt-porn.

⁵⁸ It is even more difficult to pin down porn profits than it is to determine Hollywood box office. In addition to the problems inherent in relying on self-reporting (the only way to find such figures as there are), there is no central source equivalent to *Variety*. Trades such as *Adult Video News* and *XBiz News* do sometimes provide information about which titles are most popular or profitable at a given moment, but they rarely provide actual dollar amounts. Filmmakers also tend to be consistently vague about profits.

⁵⁹ Mainstream (as opposed to gay, queer, and independent) porn titles always feature women in starring roles, whereas men may or may not be credited above the line. Several filmmakers mentioned to me that the same handful of male performers tends to find work regularly, whereas producers are always looking for new "girls" – the primary focus of the films. Pay rates and percentages of women filmmakers are difficult to compare, as pornographers tend to be even cagier than Hollywood filmmakers when it comes to such things, but I compare the industries in detail in Chapter 2, beginning on page 144.

CHAPTER 1

“Behind the Blue Camera”¹: Women’s Sexperimental Film, Critical Arousal, and the Auto- Pornographic Mode of Production

*In my opinion, the American sex industry supplies products made by men for men.
I want to show films made by women for their own pleasure. – MM Serra*

*I’m really just advocating the use of video in the hands of the common people so we can make sure we are
represented and fight fire with fire, fight media with media. – Technotopia²*

At a 2010 program from Counter Culture, Counter Cinema: An Avant-Garde Film Festival, entitled “Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations,” MM Serra remarked on the marginalization of films that deal with sexual subjects:

We’re here at 3:00 on a Saturday, because that’s an acceptable time slot for this work. It’s separated from the main body of the festival. It’s because it’s dealing with the explicit body. And I love all the work in the program. [...] When I look at Anne’s piece, I think of Maya Derren. It’s [about] domestic space. And if I put Maya Derren and Anne Hanavan’s pieces in the same program, I would get such a slap.³

Here Serra comments on the tendency to segregate and implicitly denigrate sexually explicit works in fine art contexts. Anne Hanavan, an experimental filmmaker and member of the Board of Directors for the Film-Makers’ Cooperative in New York, is quite open about having been “a heroine addict and a prostitute for many, many years.”⁴ For her, making sexually explicit films has been an overwhelmingly positive and life-affirming experience: “I’m just so happy that I can take situations from my past and use it to empower myself, instead of hurting anybody else or hurting myself, or just staying

stuck or whatever.”⁵ Although films like Maya Derren’s now-canonized *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) have been described as erotic, the difference between that and Hanavan’s work is the inclusion of hardcore content and/or marginalized sexual practices.⁶

Hanavan’s film, *I Love Jesus* (2003), which screened in the “Unruly Bodies” panel, depicts the filmmaker nude and masturbating, and at one point straddling a kitchen counter while wearing a pony-hair butt plug. Hanavan says of the film, which she describes as “an auto-erotic self-portrait” and “post modern porn,”⁷

I was just going through a really dark period in my life, and looking for some sort of outlet, and I had picked up a camera. [...] What I tried to do in my work is sort of reconfigure or re-picture the things that happened, and in a way that I can deal with it and see it in a whole different light and personalize it in a way that’s not so dark.⁸

The political and therapeutic value of sexually explicit self-representation – its feminist capability to empower the filmmaker to transform her negative experiences, to move from sexual object to sexual subject, from abject to agent – is bolstered here by the clear sense that the film is about celebrating its maker’s strength, resilience, and beauty.

She shoots herself with a handheld camera, in a full-length mirror, visually appreciating her body (which, although it is conventionally attractive in the sense that it is white and curvaceous, is also an older woman’s nude body), and in other scenes, she appreciates it in a more intimate, carnal sense through masturbation. The combination of explicit female sexuality and a confessional or autobiographical tone leads to work like Hanavan’s being marginalized or ghettoized in fine arts contexts. As Rebecca Schneider

writes of film and performance art from the 1960s, “embodied works by women could not be easily digested into the territorial ‘bad boy’ oeuvre of the avant-garde. Their authorizing signatures were suspect.”⁹

Although Hanavan describes her work as “post modern porn,” at the panel that followed the “Unruly Bodies” film program, MM Serra defined pornography by distinguishing it from art or experimental film as films that are “made to make money.”¹⁰ Both pornography and sexually explicit experimental films might titillate viewers – indeed they may be designed to do so – but she suggested that only the former is made primarily for commercial purposes. While I intend to problematize distinctions between art and pornography from the beginning, this seems as useful a definition as any for my purposes. I agree with Serra that we should consider the unique contexts of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception when categorizing films, and so I would not necessarily refer to a sexually explicit experimental film as pornography – that is, as an example from a specific genre and industry – even when I would describe it as pornographic – that is, as a film that includes hardcore content. Sexperimental filmmakers’ uses of the (auto-)pornographic enable critical arousal as a primary form of engagement with their work.

In this and the following chapters, I frame analysis of specific films with that of their critical reception and the filmmakers’ self-representation – that is, the motivations behind their cultural production, their experiences as women working within gendered production (and distribution) cultures, and their perspectives on how their films and they themselves are received by the industries and publics in which they circulate. Although I frequently refer to filmmakers’ intentions, I do not necessarily take them at face value.

Rather than privileging authorial intent, production studies methodologies allow for a deeper understanding of how the work functions in the world and how women's experiences and perspectives influence their cultural production. I consider several production cultures, three of which (mainstream, lesbian/queer/feminist, and alt porn) fall under the parameters of commercial pornography and one of which – the focus of this chapter – does not, but all of which are marginal to Hollywood. Women filmmakers in these contexts, despite the disparities among them, have used the cinema to promote forms of sexual (self-)expression and revise conventional images of female sexuality.

Women's authorship in all of these contexts has historically been obscured or elided, and by focusing on commonalities rather than differences, we can create a richer, more nuanced framework for engaging with women's pornographic filmmaking. For different – indeed opposing – reasons, both pornography and experimental film production are also marginal to US culture more broadly, as they operate at the opposite extreme edges of high and low culture. As such, the socio-economic contexts for their production tend to differ. Experimental film production tends to be funded through grants, academic or government institutions, or a filmmaker's personal finances. The latter tends to be the only possible source of funding available to pornographers whose work isn't produced through a studio or production company. While it may be appropriate to generalize and assume that pornographers' motivations tend to be primarily commercial whereas sexperimental filmmakers' tend to be primarily artistic, or in any case non-commercial, exceptions to each rule nonetheless exist.

Hanavan provides one such exception: a former sex worker, she describes her work as porn in some contexts and disavows the label in others.¹¹ And then there is

Abiola Abrams, who directed the pornographic film (or, in her preferred terminology, “sex film”) *AfroDite Superstar* under the name Venus Hottentot, and chose to do so not for commercial reasons, although it was commercially distributed, but because she felt that it was the only medium in which she would be able to express her artistic vision and political ideals. She “had never considered shooting a sexual film before,” but as she told Mireille Miller-Young in an interview for *Spread Magazine*,

The really important reason for me making this film is that the sexual images that I see of myself in mass media as a woman and as a woman of color do not represent me. And my thing is always that if you don’t like the ways you are represented, then you have to represent yourself.¹²

Meanwhile, experimental film is increasingly overlapping with the ever more commercialized art world; regardless of their original intentions, filmmakers can make quite a bit of money from featured exhibitions of their work in museums and galleries. And perhaps most tellingly, work by pornographers Candida Royalle and Annie Sprinkle was showcased alongside Serra’s experimental films in the 1993 exhibition, *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually Explicit Art by Women*.¹³ Sprinkle has straddled both the art and porn worlds for decades, having appeared in over a hundred and fifty pornographic loops and fifty adult films and directed *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981). But she also created and performed in performance art pieces like *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-95) and directed several films, including *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* (1992, co-directed by Maria Beatty), that are nearly unclassifiable for being so indebted to porn sensibilities (and distributed via adult video outlets) while at the same time undermining and critiquing them through cinematic experimentation.

The overlaps between pornography and the avant-garde are thus neither superficial nor recent developments. Seven years before the first pornographic feature was introduced into US markets, Barbara Rubin released an experimental hardcore film entitled *Christmas on Earth* (1963). Rubin's film was not the target of censorship in the way that Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* would be upon its release in 1967 (and would continue to be in various contexts through the turn of the century), but neither was it embraced by the public in the way that *Deep Throat* – widely credited with inaugurating the era of “porno-chic” and the mainstreaming of pornography – would be in 1972. In both cases, when these rather young women (Rubin was 17, Schneemann was 25) chose to begin filming, they adopted as their subject matter their own and others' sexuality. Since the early '60s a number of female film and video artists have followed suit, creating sexually explicit experimental – or what I refer to, following Ara Osterweil, as “sexperimental” – film and video that work in various ways to challenge mainstream culture's sexual repression and/or the porn industry's sexual exploitation.¹⁴

Sexperimental films involve the reclaiming of women's sexuality and sexual subjectivity, in the context of a larger cultural blind spot surrounding women's work. As Robin Blaetz writes in her introduction to the edited volume, *Women's Experimental Cinema*,

Although a few women filmmakers had done well in festivals [in the 1960s and '70s], they received neither the critical consideration nor the jobs that accompanied it, and the field of avant-garde cinema was institutionalized as a thoroughly masculine one called the American avant-garde.¹⁵

Her anthology constitutes one attempt to make up for that critical imbalance – that is, “to insert the work of these less known filmmakers into film history.”¹⁶ In this chapter, although focusing specifically on those filmmakers whose work can be described as sexually explicit, I am attempting to do the same, by centralizing work that has previously been considered largely “peripheral to tradition[s] that had been defined as male.”¹⁷

The historicizing and contextualizing of these sexperimental films and videos directed by women from the ‘60s through the present will illuminate developments and overlaps in both feminist filmmaking and the mainstream adult video industry, and – as hardcore emerges from the avant-garde before it emerges commercially and industrially – will enable a reevaluation of the conventions of contemporary pornography. Although they work outside of the porn industry and do not adhere to generic conventions, these filmmakers create or adopt pornographic imagery and/or manipulate pornographic conventions in order to critique binary and essentialist notions of gendered sexuality, as well as the historically masculinist traditions of the avant-garde and the porn industry.

As the executive director of the New American Cinema Group / the Film-Makers' Cooperative, which was founded in 1961 by a group of 22 New York artists (including Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, Robert Frank, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol), experimental filmmaker MM Serra has both directed sexperimental films and curated a number of film programs featuring sexually explicit works by women, including “Art(Core): The Avant-Garde and the Cinematic Body.”¹⁸ Serra explains that she screens these films because she thinks “it’s the most politically subversive thing to do, for women. Since the emphasis is on monogamy and romance and procreation for women within our culture.”¹⁹

David James and others have argued about sexually explicit images created by women, however, that this is only part of the story. James argues that,

[A]s long as men control women, the representation of women's pleasure can never be more than a masquerade, the representation of a male fantasy of woman's pleasure, and one that speaks male fears and male desires. Like the question of a feminine language in general, the possibility of nonsexist sexual representation must be deferred.²⁰

In other words, even seemingly liberatory or sex-positive depictions of women's sexuality can only ever appear within the context of a patriarchal, misogynist society, and can only ever be expressed through phallogocentric cinematic codes. The well documented feminist debates over pornography have tended to reproduce a binary mode of thinking about sexually explicit imagery: it should be conceived of either as subversive and potentially empowering, or as violating sexual exploitation (or, at best, unable to represent women's sexual pleasure). While Serra and James would seem to land on opposite sides of the debate, in fact neither of them is categorically promoting or condemning pornography as such. For James, the question rests on the issue of whether women can create a (pornographic or erotic) language for themselves that does not remain trapped within and therefore limited by the phallocentric, dominant semiotic system. Serra believes that making and screening women's sexperimental films is inherently subversive, while James presumes (at least, as of 1989) that women filmmakers must always be constrained by a film language that was designed primarily by men.

Following Serra, I assume that women filmmakers' interventions, both in and through their work, can be radical and effective without having to operate outside of extant systems of cinematic signification. In a statement that recalls Audre Lorde's famous pronouncement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"²¹ lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer begins from the assumption that her work challenges normative constructs through cinematic experimentation: "radical content deserves radical form."²² Indeed, the following survey of nearly five decades of sexperimental films by women will demonstrate that women avant-garde filmmakers do not need to construct an entirely new cinematic language for the representation of women's sexuality in order to create radical images that deconstruct, comment on, and even move beyond the images and cinematic practices created by the men of both the avant-garde and the adult video industry. In an essay on the films of Peggy Ahwesh, William C. Wees argues that *The Color of Love* (1994) succeeds in providing a viable alternative to (industrial) pornography – effectively escaping the representational bind described by James – because Ahwesh critically distances herself "from her film's content and formal techniques."²³ That is, unlike Carolee Schneemann, who appears in *Fuses* engaging in various sex acts with her then-partner James Tenney, Ahwesh achieves a "critical perspective on cultural production"²⁴ by removing herself from the text.

This issue of critical distance seems central to any discussion of women's sexperimental films' potential to provide radically alternative sexual imagery, to be "politically subversive" in the way that M. M. Serra imagines them to be, even as they may (or may not) titillate any given viewer. The concept of critical distance is typically applied, in the context of experimental film, in one of two ways. In Wees' formulation

above, it involves a filmmaker achieving some amount of objectivity toward her subject by removing her subjectivity (and her body) from the film. This form of critical distance is, however, neither necessary nor especially productive in order for a film to be challenging, critical, or politically engaged. Sexperimental films are often auto-pornographic – in their insertion of the filmmaker’s body or identity into sexually explicit images and scenarios – and thus their intentions are often bound up with a filmmaker’s subject position and personal history. A filmmaker need not attempt to remove herself entirely in order to explore ideas relevant to women’s sexuality, gendered experiences, intersectionality, post-humanism, or other concerns. Indeed, a filmmaker’s embodied presence – and the acknowledgement of her subject position that it implies – in a film text may well enhance her vision of women’s embodied experiences. The personal is, after all, political; all the more so when it comes to depictions of sex and sexuality. Unlike straight, white, male filmmakers, whose various forms of privilege can allow for the erasure of their identity categories, women – and especially queer and/or women of color – filmmakers are more likely to mobilize their personal identity politics to important artistic, intellectual, and political ends. The auto-pornographic mode of production practiced by many sexperimental filmmakers does in fact enable critical distance, to the extent that the films encourage viewers to think critically about the images and ideas presented.

The other form of critical distance has been formulated most famously by Bertolt Brecht: the alienation effect, through which experimental or unconventional formal techniques encourage viewers’ critical reflection about a text.²⁵ Typically involving strategies of self-consciousness or reflexivity that resist realist depictions, this type of

critical distance can be useful for implementing the sorts of interventions made by sexperimental filmmakers. Unlike most commercial pornography, sexperimental films are typically designed to resist straightforward absorption into the narrative or spectacle, and to encourage critical thought or reflection, either in combination with or instead of physical arousal. Although Schneemann does not achieve a literal distance from the text, as she appears within it, she nonetheless creates a powerful critical distance through nonlinear editing and various forms of tactile manipulation of the film strip, among other techniques. The combination of pornographic images with techniques to generate this type of critical distance allows for the creation of what I describe as “critical arousal.”

While none of the women that I have spoken to specifically mention attempting to create a new cinematic language, most have employed forms of critical arousal; several have implemented formal, theoretical, and/or technical innovations; and some have had to carve out their own paths of access, which necessarily impact the style and content of the films that they produce. Empowered by technological advancements that have allowed for the creation of smaller, lighter, and more affordable equipment, filmmakers like Anne Hanavan have been able to simply pick up a camera and begin shooting sexual images as a form of self-help. She found a home for her work in the Film-Makers’ Cooperative, the distribution branch of the New American Cinema Group. Like the experimental filmmakers who founded the Film-Makers’ Cooperative in 1961, pornographer Candida Royalle found in 1984 that she had to create her own production company, Femme Productions, located in New York – on the other side of the country from “Porn Valley” – in order to produce and distribute pornographic features that differ, in terms of narrative, style²⁶, and production practices, from the output of the dominant

porn industry. In this manner, she has been able to create narrative-driven films that do not include money shots or close-ups of genitalia, and that depict safe sex as a required production practice, but are nonetheless pornography. The conventions that she initiated have, in turn, been appropriated and replicated by major studios in the adult video industry in order to target the expanding market for (straight) women and couples.

All of the women whose work I discuss in this chapter are connected through a shared dedication to cinematic experimentation, and a willingness to depict explicit sex/sexuality and/or to engage with pornography as a mode of expression or a cultural logic. Ann Severson, for instance, depicts a series of shots of women's vulvas in *Near the Big Chakra* (1971). The juxtaposition of women's genitalia of various ages, shapes, and sizes works as a commentary on standards of (genital) beauty and women's hygiene – standards which the adult film industry has been accused of creating and perpetuating. *Fuses*, on the other hand, moves beyond “meat shots” (an adult video industry term for close-up shots of genitalia) to include hardcore depictions of Schneemann and her then-lover engaging in various sex acts. I will argue that she and other filmmakers use pornographic representation to critique masculinist forms of sexual representation, to open up a dialogue about gendered assumptions about sexuality, and to celebrate an alternative vision of eroticism. In much the same way as the avant-garde can be seen as a reaction/response/alternative to or indictment of Hollywood, these films can be read as a reaction/response/alternative to or indictment of male experimental filmmakers', Hollywood's, and the porn industry's blind spots and misrepresentations.

Among these blind spots is race or ethnicity, which can remain as such even in the work of white women sexperimental filmmakers attempting to redress issues of

misrepresentation. Women of color sexperimental filmmakers thus tend to take their redressing a step further, by creating sexually explicit films in response or reaction, or as an alternative to white women's sexual expression, as well as to male experimental filmmakers, Hollywood, and/or the porn industry. In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that, rather than dismiss representations of the hypersexuality of Asian/American women as simply racist or our enjoyment of these images as false consciousness, we must embrace and work from within the idea of hypersexuality. She insists that hypersexuality encompasses all racialized representations, not only those of Asian/American women. She argues that we ought to dispense with the notion of "bad objects" or "bad subjects" in terms of racialized sexuality, and to devise a politics of "race-positive sexuality." In order to critique these representations productively – even by way of moving past or away from them – she insists that we must first acknowledge both the pain and the pleasures expressed through and experienced as a response to images of hypersexuality. And indeed, sexperimental films are, on the whole, far more likely than pornography to acknowledge the pains as well as the pleasures associated with sex and sexuality.

Machiko Saito's *Premenstrual Spotting* (1997), for instance, expresses both the trauma (in this case, of sexual abuse, as well as the more diffuse trauma of cultural stereotypes about hypersexual Asian women) and the pleasures inherent in and enabled by sexual expression. In the film, Saito appears "naked, drunken, singing from the musical *Chicago*, masturbating, and bleeding on the bathroom floor."²⁷ At the same time, she also graphically describes sexual abuse by her father. Pleasure and danger are

thus juxtaposed uncomfortably in the film, and it is this very discomfort that opens up a space for what Shimizu describes as “politically productive perversity.”

In *Premenstrual Spotting*, Saito asserts her identity as an Asian/American woman with a unique subject position. Shimizu’s insistence that racial agendas must be expanded “beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization”²⁸ points to the necessity for feminist filmmakers of questioning neoliberal frameworks that encourage assimilation and ignore the implications of intersectionality and the specificity of different standpoints or identity formations. In conveying her subjectivity, Saito incorporates the conventions of pornography in order to comment on the realities of sexual violence, as well as to move beyond stereotypes of Asian/American femininity. The film ends with a “money shot” (or male external ejaculation), but the ejaculate on her face suddenly transforms into her own blood. As Shimizu puts it, “It is in the final moments of the tape that we understand the title as the misnaming of evidence in order to hide the crime.”²⁹ In this way, Saito appropriates a porn convention – the money shot – and uses it as an indictment, in order to resist visual pleasure and to deconstruct patriarchal abuses of power. This reframing of the abuse enables her as both the filmmaker and the film’s subject, to emerge not as victim but as agent, not as “lotus flower” or “dragon lady” but as a complex individual.³⁰

These and other concerns motivate the films discussed below, which span the decades between 1963, when *Christmas on Earth* premiered in the US, and 2014, when Kadet Kuhne began distributing her compilation of short works, *XXXperimental*.³¹ The organization of this chapter reflects the fact that, alongside the history of the porn

industry, runs a parallel history of sexperimental film and video. David James writes that,

At the beginning of the decade three distinct systems of production manufactured three equally distinct modes of filmic sexuality; 35mm films that suppressed reference to physical sexuality, especially outside marriage, made for general release by major studios; 35mm “exploitation” or “art” films that were beginning to include female nudity, made by independent producers for public distribution in theaters; and 16mm “stag” films that depicted sexual intercourse, made for private distribution and exhibition in brothels and men’s clubs. By 1970 distinctions among the generic conventions and the systems of production of these three modes had almost entirely broken down.³²

By 1963, with the introduction of Rubin’s *Christmas on Earth* – as well as Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* and Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, both of which treat themes related to male homosexuality and were also released in 1963 but subsequently charged with obscenity – the American avant-garde had also begun to contribute to the production of “filmic sexuality.”

Originally titled *Cocks and Cunts*, *Christmas on Earth*, described as “the most sexually explicit film to startle the preporn avant-garde”³³ and “among the most radical [films] ever made,”³⁴ is significantly more explicit than either *Flaming Creatures* or *Scorpio Rising*, yet it did not become the target of censorship and “neither suffered nor benefited from the notoriety associated with these films.”³⁵ Daniel Belasco describes it as “a type of performance and sexual agitprop that foreshadowed the emergence of critical body art at the end of the 1960s,”³⁶ and indeed this critical body art – practiced by

women filmmaker/artists like Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Marina Abramovic – has close ties to early sexperimental filmmaking. Rubin took her film’s title from Arthur Rimbaud’s “Morning,” from the extended poem *A Season in Hell*: “When will we ... hail the birth of new labor, new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, ... Christmas on earth!”³⁷ With that in mind, it is significant that Rubin’s vision of utopia is resolutely – even militantly – queer, with its polymorphously perverse celebration of sexual pairings and groupings involving partners of various genders. Rubin equates utopia, it seems, with complete sexual freedom.

Consisting of two black and white thirty-minute reels, which Rubin insisted be projected simultaneously, one superimposed inside the other, the film includes at least five performers, all nude and wearing body paint, engaging in a variety of sexual acts, including vaginal intercourse,

anal sex between male partners, fellatio, cunnilingus, and masturbation. Heavily edited (supposedly randomly), the film comprises a series of images more than any sort of coherent sexual narrative: images of genitalia – vulvas,



Fig. 1.1: Still from *Christmas on Earth*, showing the dual-projection³⁸

anuses, flaccid as well as erect penises – in Reel A overlaid by “recognizable albeit taboo sex acts” in Reel B.³⁹

Despite its having been made in 1963 by a non-feminist-identified⁴⁰ woman, the film itself can be read as feminist by virtue of its queerness, inclusion of male-on-male sex acts (perhaps the one taboo that even mainstream porn refuses to transgress), and resistance to or reframing of the objectification of the female body by focusing on the display of nude male (as well as female) bodies. With regard to the latter, Ara Osterweil notes that “the male performers occupy what is typically considered the ‘feminine’ position by rendering their bodies serviceable for penetration.”⁴¹ In this way, the film resists dominant constructions of gender – a feminist endeavor if ever there was one. Also, like Carolee Schneemann with *Fuses*, Rubin manipulates the images in various ways in order to create critical distance.

The film includes what Osterweil refers to as “what may be the first ‘money shot’ in experimental cinema.”⁴² If that is true, it may well also be the first publicly (and legally) exhibited money shot in US film history. Either way, it prefigures what would become a ubiquitous convention of hardcore porn; despite occasional appearances, external ejaculation had not been a notable convention of the stags and would not appear as such until the release of hardcore feature films in the early ‘70s.⁴³ As opposed to these hardcore features, however, Rubin’s film does not privilege the ejaculation, depicting it instead as,

only one of the myriad possibilities of sexual ecstasy. [...] Although shots of male orgasm would not dominate the representation of sexual pleasure until the explosion of hard-core pornography in 1972, as a hard-core film *avant la lettre*, *Christmas on Earth* presciently resists the kind of teleological impulse that would circumscribe later forms of pornography.⁴⁴

Comparing the film to Schneemann's *Fuses*, which she claims is too indebted to Stan Brakhage to move beyond his "cinematic signatures," Osterweil argues that Rubin's "brilliant innovation of double-screen projection in *Christmas on Earth* manages to incorporate experimental cinema's primary trope of the ruptured image while simultaneously critiquing the patriarchal inflections of the single frame."⁴⁵ Leaving aside the question of whether the single frame is inherently patriarchally inflected,⁴⁶ it is worth noting the affinities this claim has with Wees' claim that *Fuses* lacks critical distance.

In the latter's case, however, the claim is based on Schneemann's appearance in the film; supposedly, she is literally too close to the film, as both its subject and its object, to enable a critique of patriarchal depictions of female sexuality. This reflects the common tendency of academic and critical commentators to dismiss the autobiographical strain – associated with the feminine – within the avant-garde as narcissistic and insubstantial. Osterweil reaches a similar conclusion by focusing on Schneemann's inability to break free from the autobiographical and supposedly phallogocentric cinematic signatures of Stan Brakhage, whose films *Fuses* was intended to critique or provide an alternative to.

Created as a response to Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), which depicts his wife giving birth, and to *Loving* (1957) and *Cat's Cradle* (1959), both of which depict Schneemann's relationship with James Tenney, *Fuses* presents her sexual relationship with Tenney in a manner that Schneemann believes to be more authentic: "*Loving* failed to capture our central eroticism and [with *Fuses*] I wanted to set that right."⁴⁷ In other words, she sought to depict herself and her relationship as sexual as well as romantic, as explicit rather than symbolic, and thus she created her own sexually

explicit imagery in order to resist and respond to what she perceived as his idealized representation of her. Schneeman employs the auto-pornographic, at least partly as a means of resisting the romanticization of her erotic life by a male filmmaker.

As suggested above, the privileging of objectivity is un- and even counter-productive in the consideration of sexperimental films, the politics of which often hinge on the idea of “authentic” sexual self-expression. MM Serra and Kathryn Ramey, in an essay on Schneemann’s work, contend that, by challenging traditional constructions of the female nude as mere muse, the film does succeed in creating a viable alternative to phallo- and phallogocentric depictions of explicit sexuality:

By foregrounding herself as artist and image, Schneemann confounds cultural expectations of the sexualized female nude [...] Schneemann, through her formulation of the eye/body, is the participatory eye of the subject returning the gaze of her lover, of the viewers, and of herself as artist/editor/creator.⁴⁸

Schneemann’s insertion of herself into her film, as both subject and object, is itself feminist. The acknowledgement of her own authorship and the claiming of her own subject position are precisely what distinguishes her film from Brakhage’s as authentic sexual (self-)expression. Osterweil ultimately disagrees, insisting that, “Although she obtains directorial control of the representation of her own body, Schneemann does not manage to emancipate her film from Brakhage’s cinematic signatures,” but precisely by inserting her sexualized body into the film as well as directing it, I would argue that she does.⁴⁹

Consisting of a series of images of Schneemann and Tenney engaged in various sexual acts – cunnilingus, fellatio, vaginal penetration, kissing – and of their supine naked

bodies, intercut with images of her cat watching them and of mundane but thematically relevant activities, such as Schneemann running on a beach and Tenney driving a car, *Fuses* implies that sex is as ordinary, natural, and acceptable as these other daily activities. Significantly, many of the images emphasize mobility, either pedestrian or using motor vehicle technology. In a documentary about “post-porn,” Lydia Lunch speaks the telling line, “I want to be the one driving the car,” in regard to her experiences working as a muse for Richard Kern’s camera.⁵⁰ In *Fuses*, Schneemann is figuratively, if not literally, driving the car. That combination of female authorship and the display of the (autobiographical) body is both powerful and radical: as Rebecca Schneider writes of critical responses to Schneemann’s body art from the 1960s, “Nudity was not the problem. Sexual display was not the problem. *The agency of the body displayed, the author-ity of the agent* – that was the problem with women’s work” (emphasis hers).⁵¹

By focusing primarily on images of and within the kitchen and bedroom, the film reflects Schneemann’s subject position, emphasizing and celebrating domestic space and activities, over which women traditionally claim ownership. Additionally, Schneemann’s manipulation of the film strip – she painted, etched, stamped, and dyed the surface of the film, baked some strips in an oven, and left others out in the rain – generates critical arousal; by altering the image in this fashion, Schneemann resists a direct gaze upon her and Tenney’s copulating bodies. At the same time, it is through its use of the auto-pornographic that *Fuses* moves beyond Brakhage’s well-known film style to convey her own personal style and politics. In her performance art as well as *Fuses*, Schneemann displays an investment in using her own “flesh as material” and a preference “for

concretizing versus abstracting [...] as a way of inciting a visceral immediacy of address.”⁵²

The juxtaposition of sexual displays with mundane daily activities furthermore resists through editing what would become dominant in depictions of explicit (hetero)sexuality: teleology. Both performers appear to have orgasms, but they do not constitute the end toward which the sexual acts proceed; rather, they are interspersed throughout the film. In this way, the film resists the masculinist representational codes of mainstream pornography, according to which sexual scenes always culminate in male orgasm. *Fuses*, like *Christmas on Earth*, instead privileges a more diffuse and open-ended eroticism.

Unlike *Christmas on Earth*, *Fuses* was subjected to censorship in various contexts and has generated outraged responses. Within the academy, P. Adams Sitney effectively erased Schneemann’s cultural production, by ignoring *Fuses* and referring to her exclusively as a performer and muse for Brakhage, in all but the most recent edition of *Visionary Film*.⁵³ When the film was screened at Cannes in 1968, Schneemann claims that the “sophisticated French audience went berserk. [...] French men were ripping up the seats with razor blades and screaming because it was not truly pornographic. It wasn’t satisfying the predictable erotic, phallogentric sequence they wanted.”⁵⁴

Interestingly, Schneemann’s insistence in a 2001 interview that the audience at Cannes was upset because her film frustrated the “phallogentric sequence they wanted” seems somewhat anachronistic; though she could simply be referring to the implied sexual sequences in Hollywood cinema (or in “real life,” for that matter), the predictable phallogentric sequence culminating in male orgasm did not become codified in

pornography until at least five years after *Fuses*' premiere at Cannes. *Fuses* in a sense anticipated and resisted a convention that for all intents and purposes did not yet exist. Schneemann's retroactive reading of the audience's response, however, does provide a form of explanation as to *why* pornography became codified in the ways that it did; patriarchal culture apparently was not prepared to accept a non-teleological representation of human sexuality.

Yet others have also condemned *Fuses* for roughly the opposite reason; that is, for being too pornographic, rather than not pornographic enough. As recently as August 1989, *Fuses* was to be shown at the Moscow Film Festival. The program for the American Soviet Joint Venture, which was organized by the San Francisco International Film Festival, included a sidebar of "Sexuality in American Films," which was supposed to feature *Fuses*, along with such films as *Trash* (1970, Paul Morrissey), *Working Girls* (1986, Lizzie Borden), and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986, Spike Lee). "Only *Fuses*, after an opening night unscheduled screening, was canceled from subsequent planned screenings, and was finally screened unannounced after pressure from the USA organizers."⁵⁵ The controversy surrounding *Fuses* can apparently be attributed to the Russian organizers' condemnation of Schneemann as "a pornographer and a dangerous woman."⁵⁶

Perhaps as a response to this type of dismissal of Schneemann's work, in their defense of the film, Serra and Ramey are careful to distinguish between *Fuses* and pornography:

The density of its construction, the fragmentary images of the naked body, and the egalitarian treatment of the lovemaking mark *Fuses* as significantly different from other representations of sexual acts, most notably, pornography. Pornography

both then and now most often conforms to a strict narrative code with sustained full-body shots of the sex act culminating in one or more men ejaculating. By showing multiple ejaculations and female orgasms layered, painted, scratched, and stamped, Schneemann frustrates any attempt by the viewer to read this film for conventional pornographic pleasure.⁵⁷

Schneemann's remarks about Cannes would seem to bear this out, but what all of these scholars and critics – Osterweil, Serra and Ramey, and Wees – who discuss *Fuses* seem to have in common is the assumption that “conventional pornographic pleasure” should be construed as problematic in its gender politics or, at best, inherently artless.

While most mainstream pornography – created by a major porn studio and/or distributed by a major distributor, and marketed primarily to straight male audiences – may well fit these conceptions of pornography, the fact is that aesthetically motivated, and nonsexist, queer, and downright feminist pornographies do exist. I will discuss these types of porn in subsequent chapters, but for now it is worth pointing out that pornography and the avant-garde are not mutually exclusive, at least not in the ways that I am defining them. Indeed, some films, like *The Operation* (discussed in detail below), which won “Best Experimental Film” at the New York Underground Film Festival in 1995 and is also sold in feminist porn shops in America and Canada, are in fact distributed and discussed as both.

David James agrees with the other commentators that we should distinguish between pornography and sexually explicit experimental film, at least partly on the basis of the former's inability to convey a female or feminist perspective. At the same time, he

acknowledges that the masculinist status of pornography is conditional, and implies that, as industrial conditions change, so might pornography's aims and addresses:

The virtually exclusive consumption of filmic pornography by males is derived from the conditions of its availability, rather than from qualities innate in males (a fact underscored by the growing female market for home video pornography), and it is learned amidst other forms of socialization.⁵⁸

Although (straight) women and couples are now increasingly being acknowledged as the largest growth market for pornography,⁵⁹ I would add to James's claim the significance of women's access as cultural producers: it took several decades for women to find work behind the camera in significant numbers in the mainstream adult industry,⁶⁰ and they continue to constitute an increasingly significant minority. The relative dearth of female authorial perspectives has historically delimited the kinds of pornography that have been produced and distributed; but the fact that women were so instrumental in the creation of sexperimental cinema, which prefigured hardcore industrial cinema, suggests both that women do indeed have an interest – and a stake – in the creation and consumption of sexually explicit imagery, and that this interest is not a recent development.

Rather than placing *Fuses* in opposition to pornography, we might instead dispense with this false binary and acknowledge Schneemann's use of the pornographic to present a feminist alternative to what would become the porn genre's phallogentric depictions of sexuality, or – put another way – an originary vision of heterosexuality that the genre would later refuse. *Fuses* employs pornographic conventions to gynocentric ends. Much as industrial pornography delights in the use of puns, Schneemann includes a visual pun as a central image: her cat, Kitch (whom David James describes as “the only

stable persona implied” in the film), looking on as she and Tenney enjoy one another’s bodies and implicitly standing in for the female gaze, “the pussy’s point of view.”⁶¹ No one’s pleasure is given priority; we see each lover pleasuring the other throughout the film. The non-diegetic soundtrack of waves crashing against a shoreline, punctuated by the intermittent calls of seabirds, evokes the idea of waves of pleasure: like the ineluctable motion of the tides, the love-making in this film is depicted as an on-going process of discovery and bliss, rather than a race to achieve the goal of climax.

Linda Williams describes how porn conventions solidified during the “Golden Age” of the ‘70s, but *Fuses* – a sort of proto-porn, like *Christmas on Earth* – in presenting a playful, celebratory image of female (hetero)sexuality, exemplifies how these conventions might have developed differently, under different socio-cultural and historical circumstances. It may be difficult to imagine how the experimental form of these films could have been so influential, but surely their anti-teleological narrative structure or their more egalitarian focus on female as well as male sexual pleasure and on the pleasure of viewing male as well as female bodies could have been. And indeed these conventions increasingly *are* catching on in the subgenres of feminist and queer porn, a phenomenon that I discuss in depth in the chapter focusing on those production cultures.

Furthermore, it is equally difficult to imagine that the images in these early sexperimental films were not at least in some sense intended to arouse the viewer; that is, to assume that they did not function as pornography on some level, whether or not the filmmakers would embrace that label. The languorous pacing and intimate images in *Fuses* are decidedly erotic. At the same time, these films do incorporate various attempts to resist a straightforward sexual response. As outlined above, they include various

distancing techniques, which encourage critical reflection upon the issue of sexual difference, and by extension, the ways that it has typically been represented in patriarchal media forms. Ultimately then, *Fuses*, through its production of critical arousal, embraces the pornographic while at the same time appealing to viewers' intellects to deconstruct the same.

In the subsequent decades, various women would make other attempts at creating alternative depictions of explicit sexuality, but unlike Rubin and Schneemann, these later filmmakers would be working within and necessarily responding to the context of a "pornified" American culture. Released in 1974, Barbara Hammer's short film *Dyketactics* presents an ecstatic and highly influential vision of lesbian sexuality, with imagery somewhat indebted to *Fuses*: images of lovemaking are intercut with those of naked women frolicking and running hand-in-hand across a field. Whereas *Fuses* depicts a solitary woman (Schneemann) running along a beach, however, *Dyketactics* concerns itself with the depiction of community: a group of women frolicking together. In this sense, Hammer adds an additional political inflection; working within the context of a history of Hollywood films that rarely treat lesbian themes, but when they do depict lesbians, depict them as tragic figures in isolation from their communities, Hammer consciously creates an alternative image of joyous lesbian collectivity.

As with *Fuses* and *Christmas on Earth*, the soundtrack is non-diegetic; we never hear moans of pleasure or other sexual sounds. The slightly dissonant, tinkling bells of *Dyketactics*, much like the sounds of waves and shorebirds in *Fuses*, call attention to themselves for their lack of correspondence to the images; in this way, the disconnect between sound and image provides another layer of critical distance. In contrast to the

earlier films, *Dyketactics* is less focused on close-ups of genitalia or sex acts. As Chuck Kleinhans puts it, “*Dyketactics* (1974) presents a now-classic lovemaking film, with the camera not a distant voyeur or blunt close-up recorder as in so much pornography, but a living and moving presence capturing, framing, and reframing caresses and touching.”⁶² Although camera movement and varied framing do in fact appear in pornography, Hammer’s film nonetheless employs them more self-consciously, as when she shoots a woman laughing as she photographs her own vulva. As with Schneemann’s and Rubin’s films, the critical distance fostered by these techniques enables *Dyketactics* to constitute both an alternative expression of female sexuality, and a form of resistance to sexual exploitation – which, by 1974, was assumed to be the foundation of the nascent porn industry.

Honey Lee Cottrell, another sexperimental filmmaker whose work focused on representing a form of authentic lesbian sexuality in the 1970s, is not necessarily invested in resisting the porn industry. Although she has made experimental film and worked as a fine art photographer, she has also contributed to the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* and shot several scenes for the lesbian porn production company, Fatale Media. Released in 1979, her film *Sweet Dreams* depicts Pat Califia with an anonymous black, cis-gendered, female lover.⁶³ Each woman masturbates, and then they ultimately have sex with each other. Throughout the sequences in which she masturbates, Califia speaks in a poetic voiceover narration: “I have explored myself as another country and come home.”

After making *Sweet Dreams*, Cottrell went on to shoot at least one scene for Fatale Media’s lesbian adult video production: a female ejaculation scene for *Clips*,

which she describes as “a very clever spoof/juxtaposition of classic porn films. Nan [Kinney] is bored with her partner/wife and just wants to read the financial news, so sexy-wife-Debi [Sundahl] decides to take care of herself. She plunks down in a chair in front of the camera and starts to masturbate until she hits her G-spot ejaculation.”⁶⁴

Cottrell later made a voice cameo appearance (as the voiceover narrator) in SIR Productions’ 2001 adult video *Sugar High Glitter City*. As a result, she says that “all these elements” – pornography, art, and activism – “started getting mixed up in the same pot. They weren’t clearly separated.”⁶⁵

Regarding her motivations for creating sexually explicit imagery, Cottrell explains that, “looking deeply at sexual experience is both a personal preference and guided by my experience in the visual arts.”⁶⁶ *Sweet Dreams* does not feature Cottrell as a performer and is not overtly confessional, but like many of the other filmmakers here, her work can – according to her own assessment – be described as auto-pornographic, at least in the sense of its exploration of personal fantasy. Like MM Serra, Cottrell defines pornography as commercially produced, sexually explicit film. So while *Sweet Dreams*, which has never earned her a cent, would not fit that definition, she insists that, “the understanding of pornography and what gets to be in a museum is so much about your politics” and thus highly subjective.⁶⁷ With that deceptively simple phrase, “what gets to be in a museum” – the locus of high art forms – Cottrell points to the way in which these distinctions tend to be class-based as well as gendered.

Cottrell sees pornographers, especially those with feminist sensibilities, as “articulating this growing consciousness” about sex.⁶⁸ Rather than dismissing their work as crass or misogynist, Cottrell argues that pornographers merely “figured out a way to

cash in on the fact that we want to see this stuff.”⁶⁹ There is an honesty to that, and in a repressive culture that both condemns and obsessively focuses on sex, she has “a deep admiration for the people that work in an underground world to really find a way to release these contrary principles.”⁷⁰ Like Debi Sundahl/Nan Kinney’s and Shar Rednour/Jackie Strano’s overtly pornographic films would in 1985 and 2000, respectively, Cottrell’s film screened at Frameline Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Unlike those other works, however, *Sweet Dreams* did so covertly – because the National Sex Forum (NSF) owns the film outright and prohibits screenings of it, Cottrell found herself submitting it to the festival without permission. By providing full funding (in this case, a budget of \$5,000) and then maintaining full ownership rights, the NSF’s model for funding film production is arguably as exploitative and more restrictive than that of most mainstream porn production, and certainly more so than that of most lesbian, queer, and feminist porn production.⁷¹ Producers of mainstream porn generally own the scenes that they finance, but performers and directors can sometimes purchase the rights to their scenes; lesbian, queer, and feminist porn tends to be independently produced and often self-financed.

Funding from the National Sex Forum (like Ann Severson’s *Near the Big Chakra*) nonetheless enabled the production of *Sweet Dreams*, as both a “document of a real person’s life” and an exploration of fantasy.⁷² The NSF (now the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality) was created in 1967 at the Institute for Sex Research, to address the lack of research on human sexuality and the absence of demonstrated effective educational methodologies, and was incorporated as a private graduate school in 1976.⁷³ In the 1970s, they funded a series of films designed either

overtly for sex education purposes (as in female masturbation videos like, *Joy in Her Pleasure* (1971)), or to expand sexual knowledge more broadly. The idea behind the creation of these films is that sexually explicit media (including pornography) can serve important pedagogical purposes.

In 1979, Cottrell was a film student at San Francisco State University, and so she refers to *Sweet Dreams* jokingly as her “film school project.”⁷⁴ In addition to being designed in an academic context, it was created to perform an educational function: to teach viewers about lesbian sexuality. In describing her additional motivations for making the film, Cottrell told me that she asked herself, “How can I use these tools to send a message?” She found herself combining poetic elements, including Califia’s poignant voiceover, and images of explicit lesbian sexuality in order to convey ideas about the politics of feminism and BDSM – namely, that the two are not mutually exclusive. Although the film does not overtly comment on feminism and BDSM, Cottrell believes that it does give women implicit permission to explore their fantasies.⁷⁵ Richard Dyer writes that, at the end of the film, “The final sequence of the women making love is cross cut with shots of [Califia] masturbating, suggesting that this is her fantasy.”⁷⁶ In this way, the film arguably sanctions women’s fantasies, and the inclusion of Califia, a well-known and outspoken sex radical and advocate for BDSM, evokes the idea of marginalized sexual practices.

Intercut with images of the women masturbating or having sex is eroticized nature imagery, beginning with the opening sequence, in which a woman’s hand sensually caresses daffodils and lilies. Whereas feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Georgia O’Keefe have famously used flower imagery to symbolize female genitalia, in *Sweet*

Dreams the connection is made more explicit – as images of the fondling of flowers are juxtaposed with images of the fingering of vulvas – and all the more so when we see a woman’s tongue begin to penetrate a flower.

The juxtaposition of images of nature with images of explicit sex evokes the images of beaches and the cat, Kitch, in *Fuses* and the nature imagery in Barbara Hammer’s early sexperimental work, as well as Annie Sprinkle’s more recent interest in what she calls the “ecosexual.” *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2013) reflects both *Sweet Dreams*’ preoccupation with the natural world and its intersections with the academy – it was directed by Sprinkle’s wife, Beth Stephens, a professor of Art at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and serves a pedagogical function that overlaps with its activist aims. *Goodbye Gauley Mountain*’s primary goal is to inform viewers about the impending strip mining of the eponymous mountain, and to generate concern through appeals to ecosexual ideals. In the film, the pair (describing themselves on the film’s website as “two ecosexuals in love”) “raise performance art hell in West Virginia to help save the region from mountaintop removal destruction [...] climaxing with their wedding to the Appalachian Mountains.”⁷⁷ Though considerably less sexually explicit than most of the other films discussed here, *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* does feature the pair (sometimes with other activists) engaging erotically with the natural world: licking tree trunks, penetrating flower buds with their tongues, rubbing their vulvas on river rocks.

Sprinkle explains that the artificial divisions between pornography and sexperimental film led to her being marginalized by both the art world and the porn world, and that her interest in eco-sex has pushed her further into the margins:

I got too arty, when I stopped being interested in turning people on altogether and wanted to explore more experimental ideas. But then still, you're too pornographic for regular art people. And then you're not pornographic enough for mainstream porn people. Now I'm too green, eco, ecology-minded for most people.⁷⁸

Her "arty" work, like the *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* (1992), is often discussed in the context of women's performance art and experimental film, as in Eithne Johnson's contribution to *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov's edited volume on documentary film. Sprinkle is currently focusing her efforts on performance art collaborations with Stephens, but she told me that if she were to create "an eco-sex porn movie," she would utilize the post-porn conventions that she began to establish in the late 1980s:

Post-porn might create whole new ideas of what's sexy. Like, for example, even right now, if I made an eco-sex porn movie, I'd have people putting their face in the grass and licking the earth and grassilingus. And so that's just considered kinda weird, but to me that would be sexy.⁷⁹

This idea of "grassilingus" situates Sprinkle's ecosexual work within the context of lesbian feminist imagery from the 1970s. It evokes images of nude women frolicking in a field from Barbara Hammer's *Dyketactics*, for instance, but there is a through-line to more recent work as well. Sprinkle mentioned Marina Abramovic's contribution to the UK release of the anthology film *Destriated* (2006), *Balkan Erotic Epic*, for instance, in our conversation about eco-sex.

The website for *Destructed* challenges the false dichotomy between experimental or art film and pornography, by describing its contents as exploring “the fine line where art and pornography intersect.”⁸⁰ Abramovic’s contribution resulted from her research into Balkan folk culture and its uses of the erotic. In the film, she speaks directly to the camera, recounting various folk rituals and remedies involving genitals and/or sex acts. Intercut with these narratives are a series of live action and animated sequences enacting the folk traditions: a man stroking his penis while standing on muddy ground in the rain, a group of women singing to the sky while massaging their breasts in an open field, a group of women stopping to flash their vulvas while running around on a vast grassy field in the rain. In one sequence, Abramovic explains that “to make the crops grow, the man would masturbate into the earth.” The sequence that follows depicts first one, and then many men lying facedown in a large grassy field, penetrating the soil. “I would call Marina’s work post-porn,” Sprinkle says, pointing to its deconstruction of conventional pornographic images. She also describes the film as ecosexual,⁸¹ because of these images of nude bodies engaging in sexual acts in and with the natural world.

For both Sprinkle and Abramovic, ecosexual imagery serves to provide an alternative to the rote images from much of mainstream pornography. Abramovic says that she “went to see so many porno movies” and found herself perpetually bored and dissatisfied with the ways that men’s and women’s bodies tend to be depicted.⁸² It was “always the same thing” and it “failed to surprise” her.⁸³ So in thinking about how she could create innovative and unique pornographic images, she realized that she wanted to “return to [her] old culture,” to folklore and tradition, and the old ways of viewing human bodies and sex organs: “as tools” for fertility rituals and agricultural rites.⁸⁴ She explains

that, for instance, traditionally, women would “show the vagina to scare the gods” to stop the rain.⁸⁵ In *Balkan Erotic Epic*, she appropriates these traditional narratives and reimagines them in order to convey the erotic empowerment that can be achieved through open displays of sexuality and direct, physical engagement with the natural world.

Taking ecosexual imagery in a rather different direction, though still depicting post-human sexual coupling, Isabella Rossellini’s short online film series, *Green Porno*, begun in 2008 and aired on The Sundance Channel, features Rossellini acting out the mating habits of various insects and marine animals. Her follow up series, *Seduce Me* (2010), has Rossellini enacting the seduction rituals that precede the mating process of a variety of creatures. The primary tone of *Green Porno* is decidedly comedic, as Rossellini dons elaborate costumes and mimics the behavior of creatures that, on the surface, couldn’t differ more from human beings. In “Whale” (*Green Porno*, Season 2), she announces, while dressed as the title creature, that, “When needed, I can have an erection six feet long,” while strutting across the stage wearing a costume equipped with a giant phallus. “My films are comical to begin with, and entertaining,” she says, but she hopes that viewers’ secondary response will be intellectual:

If you’re interested in animals and you read about them, inevitably you become aware that [...] the wild animal world is suffering tremendously. I want to communicate the wonder and the amazement that I have [...] But I thought that it was also important that I marry not only the comical but also the informative.⁸⁶

In addition to its more obvious ecological messages, *Green Porno* functions to deconstruct and denaturalize gender norms. In “Bon Appétit – Shrimp” (*Green Porno*, Season 3), Rossellini declares, “If I were a shrimp, I would be a male when young” – as

she suddenly dons a dapper paper mustache and pointy paper beard – “but with age, I would become ... a female!” As she announces the latter, her paper facial hair disappears and she shows off a pink dress. Although she is overtly discussing the sexual characteristics of a disparate species, her playful performance here and in the other episodes of *Green Porno* reminds viewers of the diversity of gender and sexuality in the natural world, and her easy transformation from masculine to feminine in this video calls attention to the ways in which gendered characteristics are always a performance for human beings. Rossellini, that is, evokes Judith Butler’s conception of gender as performance⁸⁷: she dons feminine as well as masculine drag, in the larger context of shrimp drag, reminding us that femininity is a performance even for female-bodied people.

Although it has the word “porno” in its title, the *Green Porno* series is perhaps the least pornographic of the films that I discuss here. The sex acts are, after all, simulated. But it shares with Annie Sprinkle’s and Beth Stephens’ ecosexual work a dedication to environmental activism. The shrimp video, for instance, ends with an explanation of the harmfulness of the shrimping industry process known as bycatch: “for every shrimp caught, ten other lives are lost.” *Goodbye Gauley Mountain*, *Green Porno*, and *Incident Energy* (Marne Lucas and Jacob Pander, 2013; discussed below) all juxtapose pornographic imagery or ideas with images of the natural world at least partly to foster an investment in the natural world and an interest in a strain of eco-activism indebted to posthumanism. Honey Lee Cottrell similarly connects her interest in sexuality, in the making of *Sweet Dreams*, directly to an interest in nature (and indeed, she has since gone

on to focus her artistic interests on nature photography): “I had this earth-based concept – sex is why we’re here.”⁸⁸

In *What Is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe writes that in the wake of the concept of posthumanism, “new lines of empathy, affinity, and respect between different forms of life, both human and nonhuman, may be realized in ways not accountable, either philosophically or ethically, by the basic coordinates of liberal humanism.”⁸⁹ The concept of the posthuman is more expansive and progressive than the tenets of liberal humanism, in part because it decentralizes humanity, thereby allowing for these affinities rather than elevating the status of human beings and prioritizing human welfare and sexuality above all others. Eco-feminism, a term coined in 1974, tends to refer to a subset of feminism that emerged from the 1970s and reified the correlation of essentialized womanhood with nature. Janet Biehl identifies some of the themes that tend to run through eco-feminist texts like Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* and Judith Plant’s anthology, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*:

An acceptance that “women and nature” are to be counterposed, almost without qualification, to Western culture; that women have an exclusive role in developing a sensibility of “caring” and “nurturing”; and that they are unique in their ability to appreciate humanity’s “interconnectedness” with the natural world.⁹⁰

Dyketactics may seem⁹¹ to replicate some of these more essentializing aspects of eco-feminism, by depicting lesbianism as irrevocably connected with the natural world. Films like *Balkan Erotic Epic*, with its inclusion of men as well as women interacting sexually with the natural world, and *Green Porno*, with its creator/star’s playful animal

drag performances, however, resist this equation of the feminine principle with “Mother Earth.” Thus posthumanism emerges as a better theoretical context for engaging with these films than traditional eco-feminism.

Indeed, all of these films, from *Fuses* to *Sweet Dreams* to *Dyketactics* to *Balkan Erotic Epic* and *Green Porno* serve to emphasize the idea that sex is natural, even as they employ artifice in the form of metaphor, performance, or manipulation of the film strip/image. The natural imagery in the films serves simultaneously to convey that idea metaphorically through its juxtaposition with images of sex (that is, the equation, sex + nature = sex is natural) and to decentralize human beings by placing the idea of human sex as natural within the broader posthumanist context of our interrelationships with the natural world. The ironic title of *Green Porno* ultimately begs the question, why *is* it considered pornographic to depict human beings engaged in sex acts, but not to show shrimps or whales doing the same?

Images of the natural world thus serve a variety of functions in women’s sexperimental films. With regard to the floral imagery in Barbara Hammer’s early sexperimental films, Eithne Johnson writes that,

Although this “natural iconography” may be rooted in “cultural feminism,” as [Richard] Dyer suggests, its broad appeal to women should not be simply dismissed as sexist or politically incorrect. Indeed, it can also be regarded as both counteranalytic and counterpornographic: such visual “beauty” contests the clinic’s abstract anatomic exhibits as well as the pornographic “principle of *maximum visibility*.”⁹²

Johnson's assertion that these moments of "beauty" that move beyond images of sexual acts or the lead-up thereto function to resist the pornographic convention of "maximum visibility" (or, the dictate to show as much of the genital action as possible) outlined by Linda Williams in *Hard Core*,⁹³ is well taken. They certainly do serve to reframe the images of genital sexuality with which they are juxtaposed. Intentionally or otherwise, however, the care Johnson takes to differentiate these films from pornography functions to emphasize the problematic dichotomy of erotic/female versus pornographic/male.

Along with its natural iconography, *Dyketactics* does include decidedly pornographic images of cunnilingus, which do serve the dictates of maximum visibility. On the other side of the spectrum, overtly pornographic texts – that is, commercial films that are distributed as pornography – may well include moments of "beauty" for its own sake or other seemingly off-topic images that resist the dictate of maximum visibility. *Café Flesh* (Rinse Dream, 1982), an art-porn film if ever there was one, certainly does this, through its coupling of a surreal post-apocalyptic narrative with a variety of highly reflexive experimental film techniques (including slow-motion, extreme closeups, direct address to the camera, and nonsynchronous sound). And it may not be quite the same as, say, *Dyketactics*' inclusion of fields of frolicking women, but *Bella Loves Jenna* (Justin Sterling, 2003), nonetheless ignores the principle of maximum visibility in surrealist sequences (seemingly inspired by David Lynch) involving uneroticized images of a little person riding a tricycle. Furthermore, major studios often release R-rated cuts of pornographic films for cable or even video rental outlets – I once saw a softcore copy of the hardcore *Pirates of the Caribbean* spoof, *Pirates* (Joone, 2005), on the shelf of a Blockbuster store, suggesting that there is much more to porn than maximum visibility.

In other words, narrative is often important to pornographic films, to the extent that the sex scenes can be heavily edited and reduced and you can still end up with a 90-minute or two-hour long film.

So I would argue that not every moment of *most* pornographic films – with the notable exception of wall to wall or all-sex releases – is dedicated to the principle of maximum visibility. Elsewhere in the same article, Johnson argues that, “Instead of calling for the destruction of a male-identified visual pleasure, as feminist film theory has, this specular counteraesthetics, however undertheorized, has sought to produce erotic visual pleasure for women.”⁹⁴ I would absolutely agree that films like Hammer’s, as well as other sexperimental films directed by women, focus on producing erotic visual pleasure for women rather than seeking to negate men’s visual pleasure. I would add, though, that they use pornographic images and/or conventions in order to do so, and that it can be instructive to consider that use. Just as we need not reject male visual pleasure in order to create or experience visual pleasure directed at women, we need not reject the images and conventions of an entire genre and industry in order to appreciate sexperimental films by women.

Demonstrating the possibilities for feminist recuperation of pornography, by the 1980s, sexperimental filmmakers had in fact begun to appropriate porn texts, in whole or in part, in their work. Wees identifies,

a major change in the interests and intentions of North American avant-garde filmmakers who [...] came to prominence in the 1980s. Particularly notable is a reorientation of the oppositional stance traditionally associated with the avant-garde. Post-1980 avant-garde filmmakers not only stand in opposition to

mainstream, commercial cinema, as have most avant-garde filmmakers since the 1920s, but most also oppose, to varying degrees, the aesthetics of modernism that dominated avant-garde film discourse until the 1980s, especially in North America.⁹⁵

One indication of this shift is an increase in the use of found footage, a postmodernist strategy that can be traced back at least as far as Joseph Cornell's work.⁹⁶ Integrating found footage from Classical cinema with original footage that self-consciously and exaggeratedly evokes *film noir*, Abigail Child's *Mayhem* (1987), Part 6 of her series, *Is This What You Were Born For?*, employs generic conventions – a woman screaming on the nonsynchronous soundtrack, images of a young woman running away from someone or something, ominous horror movie music, a man with a gun interrupting a lesbian tryst – to generate a sense of unease.

The film effectively blurs the boundaries between past and present, old and new, by including original footage that is difficult to distinguish from the found footage. Maureen Turim writes that, "Categories of action provide the ground for the film's montage: interrogation, escape, chases, stairways, seductions, sexual couplings, bondage, and dancing."⁹⁷ The combination of thriller tropes and sounds with images of "seductions" and "sexual couplings" evokes the potential for sexual assault. The film ends with a recut sequence from a Japanese lesbian porn film. In the first such scene, one woman keeps trying to push up another's skirt; the latter resists but eventually relents, reinforcing the suggestion of sexual assault. The resistance seems more playful than fearful, however, and the pair goes on to perform cunnilingus on one another, in a "sixty-nine" position.

Footage from what at first seems to be a different film, of a masked man who appears to be a burglar, eventually reveals itself to be from the same source. The man pulls out his penis, hoping to steal some visual pleasure from the women's lesbian tryst. Because of the previous images and sounds, this scene creates anxiety about the possibility of sexual violence. Suddenly our expectations are subverted as one of the women pulls out a phallic object of her own – a pistol – and takes down the masked voyeur. She then seemingly forces him to perform oral sex on her, and the gendered power dynamics are reversed. The next shot shows the man penetrating her, and in an article about Child's work, Turim writes that, "Breaking the contact between the women, the burglar seals heterosexuality securely in place."⁹⁸ Although she adds that, "*Mayhem* as film has already thoroughly undercut such resolution" (presumably through its self-reflexive style), in fact, the "narrative" – such as it is – also directly undercuts such a reading: the film ends with one woman licking the other's breasts, followed by the women kissing one another and then dancing together in the nude.

In Child's appropriation (and, presumably, reordering) of the footage, the man does not so much show up to reassert the primacy of heterosexual masculinity as to become a prop in the women's lovemaking. Writing about conventional pornography marketed primarily to a straight male audience, Heather Butler suggests that, "The 'lesbian,' as she is typically represented in heterosexual pornography, is most often used as a warm-up for sex between a man and a woman."⁹⁹ While that may have been the case in the narrative from the source material, it is not so here. The ordering of the images in *Mayhem* suggests that the masked man may well have hoped to assert his patriarchal privilege by imposing the male gaze upon two women's sexual enjoyment of one another,

but in fact, his privilege is symbolically revoked when one of the women emasculates him with her gun. He reasserts his phallic power by penetrating one of the women, but in the end, he is revealed to be no more than an interloper. No mere warmup, the women's lovemaking is ultimately framed as the main event; once he is removed from the scene, the women seem not to miss him.

MM Serra, who has collaborated with Child on other projects, explains that *Mayhem* has been subject to censorship:

Mayhem became a classic, and it also was controversial when she made it, because it has porn in it. [...] I know when the film showed in Japan, I happened to be with her [...] and they cut the end off. They had cut the porn off, so the film came back in two pieces! So they projected it without the ending. Because our explicit body or a graphic body is [perceived as] porn, but it really isn't; it's the motivation. It's why it's made.¹⁰⁰

Serra suggests that explicit or graphic sexual images, particularly of women's bodies and sexualities, have historically been censored as pornographic, and she situates pornography as the motivating force behind sexperimental films like *Mayhem*, which seek to reclaim and reframe women's sexual representation. In *Mayhem*, Child includes the found footage of a sexual encounter from an old pornographic film in order to invite "a rereading of earlier images" in the film itself, including images of women posing in "an exaggerated version of *film noir* mise-en-scene,"¹⁰¹ and in American film history more broadly. The moment from the porn scene, in which the male burglar enters the room and "seals heterosexuality securely in place" by inserting himself into the sexual activity ironically gestures toward the phallocentrism of US popular culture, including the

output of both Hollywood (signified by the *noir* tableaux of earlier original and found footage) and the porn industry, even as the ending of *Mayhem* offers up an alternative possibility to heterosexist paradigms.

Serra chose to include *Mayhem*, alongside *Dyketactics* and *Fuses*, in her 2001 retrospective of women's sexperimental films examining the representation of female sexuality, "Coming to Power: American Avant-Garde,"¹⁰² and alongside Ann Hanavan's *I Love Jesus* in a panel on experimental films that utilize transgressive sexual images and ideas, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations."¹⁰³ Also included in both of those retrospectives is *The Color of Love* (1994), in which Peggy Ahwesh similarly uses found footage that was originally created by the porn industry in order to critique the industry's output. John David Rhodes explains:

According to Ahwesh, a friend dropped off a load of old film canisters that had been left outside, prey to the elements. Inside one canister Ahwesh discovered a Super-8mm pornographic film [...] The film had become degraded and decayed which gave it an amazing richness of color and texture. Ahwesh "did an improv on the optical printer", "slowing some sections down and speeding others up a bit, repeating some things, and elongating the cunt shots." Then she added a score of tango music.¹⁰⁴

Like *Mayhem*'s, this found footage features two women having sex with one another, with a man present; unlike *Mayhem*, however, the man is bloody, appears to be passed out or possibly dead, and is in any case incapable of "seal[ing] heterosexuality securely in place," to use Turim's turn of phrase. In this sense, the film directly resists the heterosexual paradigm.

The film also provides a powerful example of the fallacy inherent in discussions of women's filmmaking that express or imply a concrete distinction between the pornographic and the erotic, or between pornography and the avant-garde. Ahwesh found an old and deteriorating pornographic film, which she did not alter except to change its title, marginally re-edit it, and screen it in art-house and museum circuits; she thereby transformed the film from pornographic to avant-garde. This film suggests that, in some cases, when it comes to sexually explicit filmmaking, authorship, manipulation or degradation of the image, and viewing context may be the only factors separating pornography from the avant-garde. In an essay on the films of Peggy Ahwesh, William C. Wees argues that the film succeeds in providing a viable alternative to (industrial) pornography because Ahwesh critically distances herself "from her film's content and formal techniques."¹⁰⁵ The distinctions between pornography and art or avant-garde cinema are, however, far more slippery than this assertion would allow.

Wees argues that, "While 'lesbian' sex scenes do appear in pornography aimed at heterosexual males, unresponsive penises do not. Hence the subversiveness of Ahwesh's choice of found footage in which the erect phallus has been reduced to a flaccid penis and mere prop in scenes of the women's vigorous lovemaking" (303). Here Wees seems to ignore the fact that the found footage is itself an example of "pornography aimed at heterosexual males" involving "unresponsive penises." (This in no way undermines the subversiveness of Ahwesh's authority in choosing the footage, but it does undermine totalizing claims about pornography.) Arguably the unnamed film from which the found footage derives provides most of *The Color of Love*'s subversive charge, as the images of women dominating a man and the inclusion of a flaccid penis belong to the original; but

it is Ahwesh's recontextualizing of the footage, along with her decision to emphasize the film's decay through the use of an optical printer, that encourages critical reflection on pornographic conventions.

Like *Mayhem* and *The Color of Love*, Serra's experimental documentary *Bitch-Beauty* (2013) initially evokes the idea of sexual danger rather than pleasure, but ultimately to convey an empowering image of female sexuality. *Bitch-Beauty* also employs found footage, though in this case not from commercial pornography but rather from the work of another sexperimental filmmaker, Ann Hanavan. Like *Mayhem*, it also includes footage from mainstream cinema; in this case, Abel Ferrara's thrillers *Bad Lieutenant* (1991) and *Ms. 45* (1981), both of which involve elements of rape-revenge. *Bitch-Beauty* opens with an image of a partially nude woman walking toward the camera, followed in quick succession by images of a skull, a bloody screaming face, a close-up of a woman's shaved vulva, flashes of the color red, and so on. The soundtrack includes the sounds of jungle birds or monkeys chirping, and what is at first an indecipherable voiceover, though the word "cunt" can be heard clearly at one point. Suddenly words scroll up the screen: "My blood was almost like that of a graffiti artist's tag. I would leave it all over the city." Following this evocative statement, we see more bloody body parts, with a voiceover informing us that, "There's blood everywhere." Eventually we see a woman (Hanavan) reading spoken-word from a stage, and it would seem that the story whose fragments we have been witnessing is hers.

In between the violent, gory images, are more playful sexual images that become ominous by association with the others, such as an image of a naked woman (Hanavan again, from her film *I Love Jesus*) straddling a kitchen counter while wearing a pony-hair

butt plug. We begin to see shots of someone shooting heroin intercut with the images of sex and violence, and then the words “street whore” start flashing against a black screen. Hanavan reads in a voiceover that, “The number of rapes and robberies I endured over the years are countless,” and then proceeds to provide a vivid description of one such rape, as violent sexual images from Ferrara’s films flash by. As we see the image of someone shooting heroin once again, it takes on new meaning as the voiceover reveals that Hanavan had “buried her pain under layers of dope.”



Fig. 1.2: Closeup of a bloody torso in Bitch-Beauty



Fig. 1.3: Closeup of Hanavan's face in Bitch-Beauty

In the end, the images of sex, drugs, and violence come together as a feminist statement about reclaiming one's sexual and gendered identity. The words, “Dig on your own bitch gender” emerge against a black screen, and then we hear what may or may not be Hanavan saying, “That fucking bitch. Beautiful bitch,” as we see another image from *I Love Jesus*: Hanavan filming herself, nude, in a full-length mirror. The suggestion is that Hanavan has found a way, through self-representation, to take back the power she had lost as a vulnerable sex worker and addict. Serra explains that she is “interested in this blurring of violence and desire and sexuality,” but that in the context of a discussion of rape, she “didn’t want to arouse the audience,” and instead sought to “de-eroticize the

body.”¹⁰⁶ In this portrait of Hanavan by Serra, rather than the sort of violent, patriarchally imagined rape-revenge depicted in Ferrara’s films, Hanavan’s revenge emerges as the repossession of power over her own body.

The “MM” in Serra’s name stands for Mary Magdalene, her given first and middle names. When I asked why she chooses to go by these initials, she explained that she felt that “Mary Magdalene Serra” was too long (for film credits and daily life) but that she didn’t want to shorten it to Mary, because of its association with the Virgin Mary.¹⁰⁷ She embraces “Mary Magdalene,” with its sexualized connotations, as a powerful name, but made a conscious choice to resist the “virgin/whore dichotomy.” Many of her films explore themes related to sexuality, and specifically to sexual transgression, and she clearly wants to resist the cultural imperative of female purity. She identifies as queer, because, “Queerness is tied to radical politics, and I think that your identity is what you choose.”¹⁰⁸

Part of her queer politics seems to involve the blurring of boundaries and categories; she explains that one of the queerest and most powerful aspects of Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* is the fact that both “men and women are in drag, and you can’t tell who’s gay and who’s straight.”¹⁰⁹ Here she points to the ways in which the film affirms Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performance, by exaggerating the performance of femininity – the feminine drag – of both male- and female-bodied actors. The blurring of seemingly stable categories can also be a way to resist capitalism, by preventing oneself from fitting neatly into a marketing niche, so Serra insists that, “It’s important to challenge these boundaries.”¹¹⁰ This resistance is one potential product when filmmakers break down the boundary between art and pornography, thereby confusing market logics

about types of consumers – categorized according to class, gender, education level, and so on – who are expected to prefer one or the other. As Serra acknowledges (seemingly in contradiction to her definition of pornography as commercial and therefore distinct from art, though perhaps the ideas can be reconciled if we distinguish between art itself and the art establishment): “The art world, like porn, is interested in money.”¹¹¹

The production cultures of commercial pornography and sexperimental film may differ wildly, but there are significant similarities. Although mainstream porn production for a major studio may resemble Hollywood filmmaking on a smaller scale (and with far more modest budgets), independent porn production can have much in common with that of sexperimental film; both can constitute examples of artisanal filmmaking. Porn production is more or less collaborative, but it can also be intensely personal and even auteurist. Women porn directors typically star in the films that they direct, and this phenomenon is considered marketable by the industry due to the assumptions that stars enact their own fantasies in these productions and that this idea appeals to (male) consumers. In addition to depicting their personal tastes and desires, queer and feminist porn filmmakers like Mia Gimp and Clark Matthews, Shine Louise Houston, and Madison Young – as well as more mainstream filmmakers like Foochie LaBootz – insist that they have near complete creative control over their projects. Although their roles might vary significantly from production to production, in at least some cases, they write, direct, shoot, edit, cast, and sometimes also produce their films themselves. Young, for instance, told me that, “I facilitate everything with the talent, with the crew, create the script, and then on set I’m directing all of the action. I review the shots and create the shot list, and review that with my videographer”; that is, she is in charge of “running the

production, really.”¹¹² Their authorial signatures are thus more analogous to those of experimental filmmakers than Hollywood directors, whose visions tend to be enacted and refracted through the work of crews of hundreds or more.

An interesting case in point, Maria Beatty has produced and directed both experimental art-porn – including *The Black Glove* (1997), *The Elegant Spanking* (1995), and *Let the Punishment Fit the Child* (1997) – and more conventional lesbian pornography – including *Post Apocalyptic Cowgirls* (2009) – for her production company, Bleu Productions, which she founded in 1997. Eithne Johnson describes her work thusly: “Fashioned as much for film aficionados as SM enthusiasts, Maria Beatty’s movies (all produced by Bleu Productions) evoke an expressionistic world of shadows and sighs, but insinuation soon gives way to hard-core scenes.”¹¹³ Indeed her films remain difficult to classify: she reveals that her “intention was to create and provide hot, classy fetish and erotica video for commercial distribution” but she adds that, “They are aesthetic products rather than pure stroke videos.”¹¹⁴ Evoking MM Serra’s idea that filmmakers can “transform something that was porn into something else”¹¹⁵ in order to create art, Beatty sees her work as, “Taking erotic vision to a higher level as an art form rather than porno merchandise.”¹¹⁶

Among her earliest work is an experimental documentary about the Beat poets, *Gang of Souls* (1989), as well as *Sphinxes without Secrets* (1991), a documentary about female performance artists, including fellow sexperimental filmmakers like Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle. At the time, she was “drawn to women speaking out politically and socially using their bodies in performance” and “was involved with numerous video activist groups at the time [...] There was a body movement happening

at the time and I just happened to dive right into the middle of it.”¹¹⁷ In this way, she draws a through-line from Carolee Schneemann’s body art from the ‘60s and ‘70s to her own work, thereby positioning herself within the history of feminist art and knowledge production.

Her first feature film, however, was created in a decidedly adult industry context. She explains, with regard to the making of *Boy in a Bathtub* (2007):

I was approached by a Fetish/Adult Industry Producer who wanted to branch out into Adult Narrative Feature Films. I sent him this particular feature film script, as a work in progress which was co-written by me and my ex-partner Claire Menichi. Soon after reading it he gave the green light.¹¹⁸

Although her work is more overtly situated within the adult video industry in terms of its distribution contexts, her production process has much in common with experimental filmmaking, and she has collaborated with both experimental filmmakers like Serra and artist/pornographers like Annie Sprinkle. She describes herself as “a one woman operation,”¹¹⁹ as she tends to write, produce, direct, edit, and distribute the films herself, and the films themselves tend to involve a fair amount of aesthetic experimentation. While they might be sold in feminist porn stores (and several have been recognized with Feminist Porn Awards), they are less likely to be distributed through more mainstream porn channels. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, fetish films, marginalized within both the mainstream adult video industry and histories of the avant-garde, tend to be classified and sold in adult video stores as pornography even when they do not include scenes of explicit (genital-based) sex.¹²⁰

In common with both sexperimental filmmakers like Schneemann and the majority of female directors in the mainstream porn industry, Beatty shares the decision to perform in her films as well as direct. When she shifted from predominantly making documentaries to creating “intensely erotic films” in the mid-1990s, she was drawn to do so by the desire to “take my own fantasies and create this universe while performing in them as well.”¹²¹ She performs in as well as co-directs *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One!*, a collaboration with Serra in which they, according to Serra, comment on BDSM as, “performative; it’s about desire [...] and choosing positions.”¹²² In this way, she paradoxically invokes the idea of the authenticity of desire and choice in BDSM by way of a mediated performance.

The film opens with a smiling, white woman with short, blonde hair, stroking a strap-on dildo. It then cuts to a naked white woman (Beatty) in a jeweled collar and blonde pigtails, displayed – as if on an auction block – by a man in leather. The man moves around her, squeezing parts of her face and body, spanking her ass. On the soundtrack, we can hear menacing laughter. Suddenly, the woman from the first scene appears. She looks directly, knowingly at the camera, with a wry smile, after dropping some money onto the stage. She then tackles the man who had been displaying and dominating Beatty, and throws her down as well. She then proceeds to dominate Beatty in various ways – forcing the slave to lick her boots, spanking and whipping her, cutting her hair (actually a wig) off, teasing her with open flame, torturing her with clothespins on her torso and nipples, pouring hot wax onto her ass, penetrating her from behind, hanging her upside down. Intercut with these scenes are images of the *domme* dominating the man: she ties him to a wheel and spins it around, ties up his penis with

shibari (Japanese rope bondage) techniques, kicks at his scrotum with her boot, and so on. At various points, we hear moans, but it is difficult to distinguish whether they express pleasure or pain; perhaps both at once. Toward the end, the two women cut off the man's (fake) beard and (real) pubic hair, and then dress him up as a woman, as "Aren't we pretty today, Roberta?" can be heard in a voiceover. They then spank their new slave and make him/her fellate a dildo.

In this film, then, a white woman is auctioned off, a hyper-masculine man dons feminine drag, and a *domme* dominates a *dom*. Taken together, these images generate a decidedly queer picture of BDSM, as a series of reversals and transgressions of boundaries: master becomes slave, bottom becomes top, gender identities are deconstructed and fetishized, and pain and pleasure intermingle. Further blurring conventional boundaries, the soundtrack is semi-synchronous, such that the words spoken match up with the action onscreen, and yet not quite. For instance, we hear, "You little cunt, you love it. Lick my boot," as the slave licks the *domme*'s boot, but the *domme*'s mouth does not move to form the words. Additionally, it is worth noting that the film depicts one of the film's auteurs (Beatty) as the bottom or slave, reflecting the BDSM adage that "the bottom is the top," and gesturing toward the idea that the bottom typically designs and runs the scene, retaining the ultimate power to use or withhold the "safe word" that can end the scene altogether.

In the end, Beatty dons the strap-on dildo, as the *domme* caresses her. We see a close-up of Beatty's bruised buttocks as the *domme* strokes her body. This depiction of the bodily signification of performative violence points to a key difference between the production cultures of sexperimental film and mainstream porn. Jacky St. James, for

instance, told me that at her couples-oriented production company, New Sensations, she has had to tone down images of BDSM. If she wanted to show a female performer being spanked, for instance, she needed to be sure to cover up the “red spot on her ass.”¹²³

Fears about prosecution for obscenity have historically functioned to delimit pornographic representations of BDSM, as producers tend to be particularly wary of juxtapositions of sex and (even consensual) violence.¹²⁴

This is somewhat less true for Internet porn, as it is regulated differently than film and video, but Jessica Drake explained that even with Internet porn, advertisers and credit card companies can negate their contracts with a site and thereby prevent the flow of capital through it.¹²⁵ It is thus considerably easier to find BDSM porn on free sites.

Experimental film, though it has (as in the case of *Flaming Creatures*) occasionally been subject to the same type of censorship, typically avoids it (at least, post-*Miller v. California*) by virtue of its more underground status and its noncommercial ethos.

Experimental film is often not mass-produced in the way that pornography is, and indeed it can be quite difficult to track down copies of the films that I have discussed here, especially if one lives outside of a major city like New York or Los Angeles that may offer the occasional public screening. This scarcity effectively shields these films from censorship, allowing for a certain freedom of expression. The upshot of not expecting to make money off of one’s work, therefore, is that sexperimental filmmakers can avoid some of the more repressive functions of capitalism.

In 1995, Marne Lucas and Jacob Pander took advantage of this, when they created a sexperimental film that occupies a position somewhere in between the underground status of the avant-garde and the marginal but readily available category of pornography.

Their film, *The Operation*, in many ways blurs the boundaries between commercial pornography and sexperimental cinema. Lucas and Pander had never worked in the porn industry, and did not intend to make any money off of their film. Indeed, when I spoke to her in 2009, Lucas admitted that she had “never made a dime on *The Operation*.”¹²⁶ Radius Pictures – Pander’s company – continues to offer VHS copies for purchase, but it has not turned a profit to speak of. It has been distributed both on the experimental film festival circuit as an experimental/art film (as at the New York Underground Film Festival), and as pornography through feminist sex shops such as *Come As You Are*, achieving a reputation along the way largely through word of mouth.

Lucas is grateful to the trailblazers from the adult industry who paved the way to enable the creation of a sexually explicit art film like *The Operation*:

The people that I got to be close to over the years were Annie Sprinkle and Sharon Mitchell, Candida Royalle, and they were all ‘70s porn stars who have now gone on to much bigger projects, like getting their doctorates and producing their own films and writing books and whatnot. All those people had to go through a tremendous amount of risk to do the projects they did, and then I come along and it’s the ‘90s, and it’s OK to make an experimental art-porn film. I’ve had no backlash for having done it, but I’m very aware of the fact that a lot of people did a lot of work to make it sort of constitutionally OK for me to do it.¹²⁷

It is significant that, although Lucas elsewhere avoids applying the term “porn” to *The Operation*, here she acknowledges not, say, Carolee Schneemann or Barbara Rubin, but Annie Sprinkle, Sharon Mitchell, and Candida Royalle, thereby validating the through-lines and intersections between porn and sexperimental film production. Her film has in

turn proven influential in porn circles. She explains that when she first met Candida Royalle, she wanted to give her a copy of *The Operation*. Royalle's response came as a bit of a shock: "She looks at it, and she's like, 'Oh, I already have a bootleg of this.'"¹²⁸ Indeed, in my interviews over the years, several pornographers (including Annie Sprinkle) have mentioned loving the film after learning that I had talked to one of the creators of *The Operation*, and this speaks to the cachet the film has developed in porn circles since its release in 1995.

The Operation has a clearer narrative structure than most of the films discussed so far. Shot in infrared, it depicts a sexual encounter between a male patient (Pander) and a female surgeon (Lucas), observed by a row of onlookers dressed in futuristic-looking Tyvek clothing and gas masks. The couple engages in oral sex and vaginal penetration on a gurney, and the sequence includes a money shot. Originally the film was going to end with the money shot, but Lucas explains that "it just didn't feel right. And so the way to change it was to have the cum shot earlier, then the male character has to please the surgeon. Then it ends, on this very intimate note with them kissing, which so many people have responded to."¹²⁹ The editing, then, works to subvert porn conventions, while the infrared film stock, which renders their bodies translucent – a hauntingly beautiful, otherworldly effect – is literally alien-ating, and thus works to create critical arousal.

In a statement that echoes Marina Abramovic's boredom at watching conventional pornography, Lucas explains that both she and Pander "had a healthy interest in erotica, but we thought it all sucked."¹³⁰ Their solution was to "do art plus explicit, and make something new," and Lucas emphasizes the importance of the infrared

technology and the resistance to the “classic porn ending” of the money shot in elevating the film above conventional pornography. At the same time, she acknowledges the relative arbitrariness of these distinctions: “Of course, a fine art film is black and white. If that same film was shot not in infrared but in color, there would be nothing interesting. It would just be a porn movie. It would be: patient and surgeon get it on, with some observers watching.”¹³¹ She adds that it “might be a little more sensitive [than a typical porn film], because of the ending” – the couple kissing rather than a money shot – but ultimately she sees the formal experimentation enabled by the infrared film stock as the primary factor distinguishing her film from conventional pornography.¹³²

Unlike in mainstream porn marketing, which emphasizes women filmmakers’ branding as such, although Lucas collaborated on every level of the production of the film – editing, producing, writing, creating the set design, directing the action, performing – Pander is typically credited as the sole filmmaker, while Lucas has achieved recognition only as a performer. In her interpretation of this phenomenon, despite the fact that she had occupied dominant positions both in the film as the doctor to her co-star’s patient and as co-creator behind the camera, the important factor is her status as penetrated body. She critiques the idea of,

being in the film and having a powerful role versus then the film’s done and you’re sort of the person that was penetrated – I don’t know how porn stars view that, but it’s sort of like, over time I’ve had to stop really caring about that facet, but it definitely bothered me for a long time.¹³³

Again, she draws a parallel to the experiences of women in porn, and she believes that this phenomenon reflects the sort of “reverse sexism,” in Lucas’s words, established in

commercial mainstream pornography. In mainstream porn, female performers tend to achieve fame and recognition insofar as their bodies constitute the industry's primary form of currency whereas, as Lucas puts it, "men are sort of incidental."¹³⁴ She seems to suggest that men in porn exist almost as pure phallus, and even though the women's bodies are celebrated and focused on, while the men's are mostly elided, female performers are ultimately demeaned through their penetrability.

As I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter, women performers' status as the primary objects of desire in mainstream pornography paradoxically empowers them to move behind the camera, where they can achieve greater creative control. Female performers' earning power far surpasses males', on the whole, and women who manage to achieve a certain level of stardom can mobilize it into the development of a brand, which they can then use to jumpstart a directing career. But there is another side to this trend: unlike her male counterparts, if a woman wants to direct in the mainstream porn industry, having worked first as a performer is all but required. Lucas's association of the dismissal of women performer-directors' (of sexually explicit cinema) creative control with their penetrability seems a possible explanation for this.

Lucas also attributes this double standard to the sexism endemic to both the art world and US culture at large; she feels that her work as a cultural producer has been written off in the way that so much of women avant-garde filmmakers' work has been for so long: "women's art is seen as confessional" and therefore dismissed as less critical or intellectual than men's.¹³⁵ With reference to her photography, she adds, "If you make art about yourself – like I do all these self-portraits – I'm sure a ton of people consider that

vain, or don't get it, or don't see why that's art [...] And if men do a self-portrait, that's sort of more respected somehow.”¹³⁶

Here the double standard seems particularly egregious, since *The Operation* is a collaboration between artists of two different genders – both of whom also chose to perform in it – but only the woman filmmaker is called out for the role she played in front of the camera. Originally, neither Pander nor Lucas had “had any intention of being in this film,” but their \$500 budget proved restrictive; they had access to the infrared camera only for a weekend, and though they had planned merely to co-direct, they wound up co-starring as well when they could not find anyone willing to perform in the film without being paid.¹³⁷ Just as Schneemann's work has been dismissed as autobiographical by Wees and earlier commentators as a result of her choosing to perform in her own film, Lucas feels that she has been dismissed as a creator due to her decision to appear in *The Operation*, even as Pander's decision to do likewise has not had any apparent impact on the critical reception of his filmmaking.

For *Incident Energy* (2013), their most recent collaboration, Lucas and Pander created a four-channel video installation, again using infrared technology.¹³⁸ In a statement that they released about the project, they explain that it explores “themes of nature, culture and the body”:

By utilizing Range Phenomenology technology usually associated with military, border, or aerial surveillance, we aim to inspire contemplation by framing the luminous energy of the human body and offering a glimpse into visual worlds that are ever-present yet hidden from perception. [...] Scenes filmed in nature and in

contemporary settings reflect events and emotions of community, love, crowds, juxtaposed with vast solar, lunar and interstellar imagery.¹³⁹

Here their investment in posthuman ideals is made manifest. *Incident Energy*, like *The Operation*, comments on the fraught nature of technological advancement, its ability to enable both erotic exploration and a culture of surveillance, both artistic expression and biopolitical control, both connection and alienation. The artists shot their footage in Portland, as well as along the Oregon Coast and in Mt. Hood National Forest, in all four seasons, “to correspond with the seasons of human life.”¹⁴⁰

The correlation of “seasons of human life” with seasons in nature, along with the inclusion of both natural and urban settings, in *Incident Energy* serves as a reminder that human civilization cannot be neatly separated from the natural world, and the juxtaposition of sex acts with a variety of nonsexual images and activities serves to situate sex within a wide range of normal human behaviors. *Incident Energy* moves beyond *Fuses*, *Dyketactics*, *Balkan Erotic Epic*, *Sweet Dreams*, and *Green Porno* in its posthumanism, however, by positioning human beings on a spectrum that includes not only the flora and fauna of planet Earth but also extraterrestrial bodies and phenomena. In addition to the otherworldly style that it shares with *The Operation* by virtue of the infrared technology, *Incident Energy* includes actual images of other worlds. In this promotional image for the piece, an image of sexual congress is juxtaposed with a potential result thereof (as a woman rubs her pregnant belly) and a winter forest, all of which are overlaid on an image of the cosmos:



Fig 1.4: Promotional image for Incident Energy

The pregnant belly and parts of the lovers' bodies are further aligned with the trees and the worlds beyond, by virtue of the infrared film stock: all share an ethereal glow. In the film itself, images from the four channels likewise juxtapose the human with the terrestrial and the celestial. One channel might show, for instance, a woman rubbing her pregnant belly while another channel shows what appears to be a satellite-derived image of the sun; later, the sun appears inside the pregnant woman's belly, literalizing the life-sustaining connections between our embodied experiences and the world(s) outside and beyond, while a man's figure walks in the waves on a shoreline in another channel.

Marjorie Sturm's 2003 film, *Voice or No Voice*, does not quite align with the posthumanist tendencies of these other films; although it does situate its subjects within a broader ecological context, it focuses exclusively on urban settings. While most of the more recent filmmakers' output falls in line with Wees' assertion that post-1980s avant-garde film resists Modernist tendencies, *Voice or No Voice* in many ways hearkens back to the "high art" sensibilities of *Fuses* – though, interestingly, Sturm had not seen *Fuses* prior to directing *Voice or No Voice*.¹⁴¹ Like *Fuses*, *Voice or No Voice* is a sexperimental

film depicting a graphic lovemaking session between the woman filmmaker and her male partner.

Also like Schneemann, Sturm uses various techniques to distort the image and thereby resist a direct gaze upon the performers' bodies. *Voice or No Voice* was shot on digital video, so Sturm does not manipulate the materiality of the text, but she does use varying degrees of focus, extreme close-ups, and switches back and forth between black and white and color, and between images of the sex session and images from daily life – most of the latter comprising shots of passengers riding a city bus, which recall Schneemann's shots of Tenney driving a car. Although the shifts in focus, framing, and color function as alienating in the Brechtian sense of encouraging reflection, the images are not disturbing like those in *The Operation*. Ultimately we are drawn in by the film, and encouraged to envision sex in the context of normal life and engagement with one's community. Like *Fuses*, the resulting picture of sex is erotic, romantic, and loving, but *Voice or No Voice* arguably conveys a sense of community that is lacking in *Fuses*, as its characters forgo the isolation fostered by a personal motor vehicle and traverse the city via public transportation like contemporary *flaneurs*.

The ending of the film, however, further distinguishes it from *Fuses*, and indeed from all of the other films discussed here. The concluding shot of the sex session is of an ejaculating penis, which comes slowly into focus just as the penis begins to become flaccid. When I asked why she had chosen to end her film with a money shot, Sturm replied: "I was aware of the convention of ending the film with 'the money shot' [in pornography] and I chose not to break it. The film is playing with convention on so many levels that I figured that I would stick with that one in order to give it the tiniest of

organizational structure, or narrative.”¹⁴² Working against this convention is the credit sequence, which follows the shot from the bus: as the ending credits roll, a woman’s hands flip through a calendar depicting male nudes. This works to critique the ubiquity of images of women’s naked and objectified bodies in American pop culture generally, and of commercial pornography’s obsessive display of the female form – all the more so because these images of naked male bodies are among the clearest in the film (the majority of which is at least partially out of focus).

Sturm explains her decision to end the film in this way as a bit of an ambush on the typically straight male audience for pornography:

So, the choice of this string of naked men at the end of film was one of my more conscious moments in making the film. I did it because I could. I knew a lot of straight males were going to be in the audience, and I knew that the majority of them would be fine with it, or would want to be fine with it, or would pretend to be fine with it. I knew it would make certain men uncomfortable, and that felt good, too.¹⁴³

Sturm thus intentionally employs one porn convention – the money shot – only to subvert another, the fetishizing of the female form. The idea seems to be, at least in part, the exploration of gender and sexual identity and the deconstruction of the dictate for “maximum visibility” of the female body. She reverses the gaze in order to generate critical arousal, so that straight male viewers might question their own assumptions (apparently, if they can look beyond their liberal guilt – or “pretend[ing] to be fine with it” – to acknowledge them) about gender.

Most of these films, despite their more or less radical revisionings of gender and sexuality, nonetheless neglect to address the repressive functions of other identity categories. In her early experimental films, however, Cheryl Dunye examines various facets of her own identity, from an intersectional perspective that considers the interrelationships of race, sexuality, class, and gender expression: “I am my own text,” she says.¹⁴⁴ Kathleen McHugh, in an article on Dunye’s work, explains that, “She called these films ‘Dunyementaries,’ a genre that combined autobiography, documentary, fiction, and humor with an experimental style.”¹⁴⁵ Several of these films, including *She Don’t Fade* (1992), in addition to her first feature, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), are somewhat sexually explicit, but it was not until the release of *Mommy Is Coming* in 2012 that she made a foray into hardcore. Produced in Germany and distributed by TLA Releasing, which “is dedicated to bringing the very best in LGBT cinema to audiences across the world,” *Mommy Is Coming* is (one assumes) decidedly less personal than her Dunyementaries.¹⁴⁶ With a loose narrative structure organized around hardcore sexual numbers, and featuring porn performers Papi Coxxx and Lil Harlow in leading roles and genderqueer porn star Jiz Lee in a supporting role, the film explores the incest taboo. So although it is not necessarily distributed or marketed as porn, it nonetheless has clear connections to the industry.

Like most of her previous directorial efforts, Dunye’s *Mommy Is Coming* involves various shifts in register and style, along with patently self-reflexive moments, all of which function to generate some amount of critical distance from the material. Exterior shots are often shaky and handheld, often to the point of being unclear, while interior shots are generally more stable and high definition. In the film’s first scene, Dunye

makes a cameo appearance as a cab driver – unlike Schneemann, she is both literally and figuratively “driving the car.” In the backseat, we witness what appears to be a rape, as one character holds a gun to another’s head and “forces” her to undress. The “victim” then subverts our expectations by putting a condom on the gun before allowing herself to be penetrated by it. It still seems as though this might be a replay of the old “no means yes” paradigm common to more problematic pornographic and mainstream depictions of rape, in which the victim is depicted as “coming around” to wanting it, until the dialogue after the sex makes it clear that the two are in fact a couple and had planned this fantasy tryst in advance. Thus what seemed to be rape becomes reframed as a consensual BDSM scenario. This is our first hint that, in the world of this film, things are often not as they seem. Featuring queer porn star Lil Harlow as Dylan and FTM trans porn star Papi Cxxxx as Claudia/Claude, the scene is furthermore decidedly queer, and all the more so once Papi’s gender identity becomes the focus of the film.

After this initial scene, the actors tell the audience about their roles in the film, before the narrative resumes. In a later scene, they again speak directly to the camera, but this time in character. The film stock used in these later “confessionals” differs noticeably from that of the performers’ confessionals, and it becomes clear through the content of their monologues that, say, Dylan rather than Lil is speaking, but this shift from performer to character is initially confusing and functions to further blur the line between fantasy and reality, as well as to keep us disoriented and thus establish critical distance between viewer and narrative.

The narrative itself hinges on several cases of mistaken identity. Initially appearing as Claudia, the character played by Cxxxx then decides to pose as Claude, in

what is described in marketing materials as “a gender-bending rollercoaster” that ultimately results in Dylan having sex with her own mother (played by sex educator Maggie Tapert).¹⁴⁷ Claudia and Dylan break up shortly after the initial scene in the cab, and meanwhile, Dylan’s mother is headed into town for a visit; hence, the first meaning of “mommy is coming.” Her mother arrives and checks into the hotel where Claudia – now posing as Claude – works, and proceeds to flirt with the “studly hotel clerk.”¹⁴⁸ Toward the end of the film, after Claude and Dylan’s mother have had sex several times, Dylan shows up as another such sex session is about to begin. Claude/ia neglects to tell Dylan about her mother being in the next room, and Dylan initiates sex with Claude/ia. They briefly part ways as Claude/ia attempts to figure out a solution to this predicament, when Dylan manages to walk into the darkened bedroom where (unbeknownst to her) her mother is lying in wait, ready to be penetrated from behind. Dylan, assuming the shadowy figure to be her ex, obligingly straps on a dildo and starts penetrating away. Claude/ia arrives too late; hence the second meaning of “mommy is coming.” This moment is followed by an ironic intertitle: “Is this how our fairytale ends?”

The incest is ultimately dealt with rather casually. Dylan is initially somewhat horrified to learn that she has been having sex with her own mother, but they quickly proceed to laugh it off. The film ends with the performers speaking directly to the camera about the mother/daughter sex taboo, most of them suggesting that although it is a taboo, it is not necessarily a turnoff. (Indeed, as of 2014, incest is among the most popular themes in mainstream pornography.¹⁴⁹) Some admit to having had sexual dreams involving family members. Jiz Lee talks about the concept of “motherfucker” as the worst possible insult and suggests that the film is exploring that idea. Indeed, after

having sex with Dylan's mother for the first time, Claude looks into a mirror in shock and then turns directly to the camera to exclaim, "Motherfucker!" Little does the audience know at that point that the film will push that idea even further in its final scene between Dylan and her mother.

Mommy Is Coming thus seems to function primarily as an exploration of fantasy versus reality, serving simultaneously to emphasize the distinctions thereof – especially in this final sequence, when the performers clarify that the idea of incest can be sexy even if actual incest may not be – and to blur the lines between them, as in the fluid movement back and forth between roles (from performer to character and back again) and genders (from Claudia to Claude and back again, both embodied by an FTM trans performer). So even as the film reminds us that Maggie Tapert is not *really* Lil Harlow's mother, it asks us to consider the extent to which culturally, socially, institutionally, and biologically defined identities exert biopower¹⁵⁰ over our interactions with one another. Some sexual acts and couplings are legally and/or culturally sanctioned, and others are not. Indeed none of the sexual exploits in this film – all of which are queer and most of which involve BDSM, sex toys, interracial pairings, and/or at least one trans*¹⁵¹ performer – fall within American cultural norms, but juxtaposed with something as fraught as incest, the queer pairing of Claudia and Dylan becomes naturalized. In its playful exploration of the incest taboo, the film is not so much asking us why it would be so wrong for a mother and daughter to have sex with one another (though it may well be doing that) as it is asking us to reflect on the limitations engendered by socially prescribed roles and a repressive sexual culture.

Although it might, in terms of its narrativity, distribution, and reception, be more readily compared to a hardcore independent art film like *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006) than to the experimental films discussed in this chapter, the experimental stylistic strategies employed in this film (as well as Dunye's previous work as an experimental filmmaker) position it within the scope of the sexperimental. And although their other exhibition contexts might differ, along with the avant-garde work of Barbara Hammer and Abigail Child and the pornographic work of Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano (among others), *Mommy Is Coming* screened at the Frameline Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

Similarly, in conjunction with the archival wing of Outfest, a Los Angeles-based LGBTQ film festival, on December 7, 2013, the Outfest-UCLA Legacy Project sponsored a screening of *Sexperimental* (1992-2001), a compilation of the "pioneering queer analog video art of Kadet and Texas."¹⁵² Although *Sexperimental* is no longer being distributed, Kadet Kuhne has compiled some of the same work – *Cunt Dykula* (1993), *Ego Beach* (1993), *You Little Devil, You* (1994), *Fuck Film* (1995), *Impact Zone* (1996, with Sophie C.), and *Pussy Buffet* (2001, with Ursula) – into *XXXperimental*.¹⁵³ All of these films share a playful tone, even when a hint of violence creeps into the images, and a decidedly queer perspective and aesthetic.

In *Cunt Dykula*, shot in black and white, a butch in a leather jacket attempts to bite another woman. The woman stops her, and an intertitle displays the dialogue: "No, Cunt Dykula, that's not safe!" Then there is a cut to a close-up of the would-be victim holding up a dental dam. The film thus plays with generic conventions, queering an already semi-queer horror trope – vampires' indiscriminate lust for blood – in order to

convey a safer sex message. What is “not safe,” ironically, is not being bitten by a vampire or engaging in queer sex, but in doing so without using protection.

In *Fuck Film*, we see a series of images in quick succession – a woman masturbating, a person in bondage and wearing a ball gag, a woman writhing around naked but for a film strip wrapped around her body, a woman with a film strip being shoved into her mouth, a woman fucking a camera, another fucking a film reel, a woman using a film strip to masturbate by rubbing it along her vulva, a woman looking through a camera while jerking off a strap-on dildo, someone getting their scalp pierced, someone eating a film strip out of a woman’s crotch, and so on. Most images are in black and white, but there are seemingly random flashes of color, some manipulated to appear very bright:



Fig. 1.5: Film consumption, in a still from Fuck Film

Some of the images are heavily processed, while others are not. Due to the rapid editing, it is difficult to tell how many different performers are featured in the film – and, in some cases, what their genders might be – as the images flash by so quickly. In a description from her website, Kuhne describes her work thusly:

With the goal of forming somatic experiences which can prompt visceral responses to sound and movement, Kadet openly exposes the use of technology in her practice by employing fragmented, jump-cut edits and amplifying evidence of sonic detritus. This glitch aesthetic, contrasted with layered ambient reflection, is intended to heighten tensions between motion and stasis: a balanced yet heightened "nervous system" to reflect our own.¹⁵⁴

The unease generated by the rapid editing, the sometimes indeterminate yet shockingly sexual images, and the mix of different visual styles and formats (black and white versus color, heavily processed or not, and in one case, and sporadic use of other techniques like split screen) in *Fuck Film* serves a political purpose. Shaking viewers out of their complacency, its critical arousal encourages reflection on the uses of sexual representation. *Fuck Film* ends with a woman being wrapped in saran wrap, with film emerging from her mouth and vagina. The title is thus made literal, as well as perhaps constituting a playful statement in favor of the analog video (as opposed to film) format, and viewers are asked to consider the political ramifications of film consumption, and how women and queers – so often objectified or elided in mainstream cinema – might sexualize, and thus reframe, the source of their objectification.

The films discussed in this chapter each utilize pornographic imagery for a twofold purpose: to create alternative representations of female sexuality, often for female spectatorial pleasure, and to critique dominant, phallocentric representations of sexuality. The fact that sexperimental films by women often remain in opposition to or in conversation with the works of male filmmakers does not render them politically impotent. Just as the avant-garde and Hollywood cinema cannot be seen as entirely

autonomous traditions, neither should women's sexperimental films be expected to achieve complete autonomy from either the masculine avant-garde tradition(s) or the porn industry. The important question, for my purposes, is the extent to which these films succeed in intervening into the historically male-dominated worlds of the American avant-garde and the US porn industry, through the use of critical arousal and the auto-pornographic.

Some of the filmmakers, like Schneemann, have endured censorship, while others, like Lucas, have experienced a form of erasure; yet their works nonetheless continue to be exhibited and/or distributed, and to receive critical attention. Their legacy is to continue to open doors for the subsequent generations of women sexperimental filmmakers, even as Marne Lucas acknowledges the important legacy of female pornographers in paving the way for her own film production. And while all of these filmmakers operate on the margins, as David James puts it,

The binary division between Hollywood and an avant-garde is misleading; non-industrial film is produced in a field that comprises multiple positions more or less close to, more or less distant from studio production, with representational codes and production strategies continuously circulating among them.¹⁵⁵

I would argue that the adult video industry should be included within this tapestry of interrelated film production cultures and aesthetics, and that much as we cannot defend a dichotomy that utterly separates out such historically linked modes of production – Hollywood and the avant-garde – while entirely eliding others, it is equally prudent to reject any sort of neat binary between pornography and experimental film. Sexperimental film is one bridge across the binary divide.¹⁵⁶

As more and more women, many of them with liberal arts educations and some with post-graduate degrees, adopt roles behind the camera in the adult video industry, it seems reasonable to conclude that the women of the avant-garde could – and may already – have a significant impact on pornography that does achieve wide, popular distribution. Annie Sprinkle, for instance, has worked comfortably within both the fine art world and the porn industry, and her educational and performance art background has enabled her to create self-conscious, sex-positive adult videos. Even before she embarked on her career as a performance artist, she found ways to include experimentation in her porn work: for her first directorial effort, *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, she wrote the script, and told me that she “had written something more experimental, actually – a lot more experimental,” but that the economic model of the commercial porn company that produced the film, DistribPix, required that she tone down the experimentation and “make sure that [the film] fit the formula.”¹⁵⁷

Although experimental film is sanctioned by the academy as an object worthy of study, in a way that, even with the recent rise in “porn studies,” pornography simply is not, the pornographic nonetheless finds its way into pedagogical contexts. MM Serra teaches at the New School in New York, where one of her classes focuses on “Sexual Personae in Film.” Cheryl Dunye has taught at UCLA, among other places, and in a course on “Black Women Filmmakers” she screened her own auto-pornographic films, including *The Watermelon Woman*, in which she appears nude and engaging in explicit sex acts. Meanwhile, Tristan Taormino and Jessica Drake, among other pornographers, routinely lecture about sex and pornography at universities across the country, and Tristan Taormino has recently teamed up with three UCSB professors – Constance

Penley, Mireille Miller-Young, and Celine Parreñas Shimizu – to co-edit a book and co-organize an annual conference on Feminist Porn.

Many of these films also serve pedagogical purposes beyond the academy. Much as Honey Lee Cottrell created *Sweet Dreams* as a sort of student film, while in the film program at SFSU, as well as a document of lesbian fantasy and sexuality, pornographer Dan O’Connell’s first film was begun in a film class at UCLA, by one of his fellow students, as a documentary about lesbian lifestyles. And much as Sturm seeks to ambush her straight male audience with images of male nude pinups in *Voice or No Voice*, in order to convey a message about gender and objectification, Taormino – Vassar graduate, author, sex educator, and former *Village Voice* columnist – creates an ambush of her own by including scenes of women penetrating men in porn marketed as heterosexual, thereby catching straight men with their pants down, as it were, and asking them to examine their own gendered assumptions.

In this way, as will be elaborated in detail in the chapters that follow, the pornographic – obsessively concerned as it is with sexual difference – can indeed prove both educational and politically efficacious in its traditional contexts as well as in the avant-garde. While some amount of critical distance – preventing both complete immersion into a narrative and solely physical responses to sexual images – may be necessary for this to happen, films including this type of imagery need not resist arousal or scopophilia in the spectator. Nor do they need to involve putting the filmmaker at a remove from the sexual content; the auto-pornographic mode of production, which leaves sexperimental filmmakers vulnerable to dismissal as too “confessional” by critics even as it renders female pornographers’ work marketable, in both cases enables women

filmmakers to mobilize their own subject positions and identity politics toward the feminist goal of revising traditionally male-directed images of female sexuality. It is entirely possible for sexperimental films to engage both sexual and critical faculties; that is, to generate critical arousal. To adapt Timothy Leary's phrase, these films at their best turn us on even as they insist that we tune in.

In this way, pornography and the avant-garde both share a dedication to transgression. In describing her affinities with Beat poets (about whom she directed a documentary), Maria Beatty – whose work itself occupies a fraught space between porn and the avant-garde – explains that she felt “a connection to rebellion against conventional attitude and structures and lifestyles advocating personal release through heightened sensory awareness and free thinking.”¹⁵⁸ Female pornographers and sexperimental filmmakers both cross and blur various boundaries, including (in many cases) the artificial dividing line between creator and muse, filmmaker and film text: Carolee Schneemann, Marne Lucas, Maria Beatty, Cheryl Dunye, MM Serra, Anne Hanavan, and Machiko Saito, like most female pornographers, feature their own bodies in their bodies of work.

Rather than focus on the sometimes arbitrary distinctions between these two marginalized cultures of production, pornography and the avant-garde, it is useful to think in terms of their shared implementation of the pornographic (as well as how they differ in that implementation), so that we might consider what happens when women reverse the gaze – even if it's back onto their own bodies – and do the looking. Women filmmakers in both contexts, despite the very real differences among them, have used the same artistic medium to promote (often quite radical) forms of sexual expression and

reclaim damaging, violent, and oppressive images of female sexuality. Women's voices in both contexts – themselves already marginal to mainstream culture – have historically been marginalized, and by placing them in conversation with one another and focusing on affinities rather than discrepancies, we can create a more expansive picture of women's sexual expression that makes their voices central.

¹ Candida Royalle's evocative phrase for describing porn directing (with a sly reference to the famous porno from 1972, *Behind the Green Door*), in her contribution to *The Feminist Porn Book*.

² This quote appears as an intertitle in Kadet Kuhne's *XXXperimental* (2014).

³ MM Serra, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations," *Counter Culture, Counter Cinema: An Avant-Garde Film Festival* (Program 5), co-curated by David E. James and MM Serra, programmed from the collection of The New American Cinema Group/The Film-Makers' Cooperative, October 16, 2010.

⁴ Anne Hanavan, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations," *Counter Culture, Counter Cinema: An Avant-Garde Film Festival* (Program 5), co-curated by David E. James and MM Serra, programmed from the collection of The New American Cinema Group/The Film-Makers' Cooperative, October 16, 2010.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See, for instance, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 56, in which Lauren Rabinovitz describes *Meshes of the Afternoon* as "Deren's erotic, violent fantasy."

⁷ “Anne Hanavan,” *The New American Cinema Group/The Film-Makers’ Cooperative*, accessed April 1, 2014, http://film-makerscoop.com/rentals-sales/search-results?fmc_author=840.

⁸ Anne Hanavan, “Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations.”

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 41.

¹⁰ MM Serra, “Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations.”

¹¹ At the “Unruly Bodies” panel, she replied to my question about whether or not she would describe her film as pornographic with a resounding, “No, absolutely not.” But on the Film-Makers’ Coop website, her film is described as “post modern porn.”

¹² Abiola Abrams, “AfroDite Superstar: Abiola Abrams’ Hip-Hop Alt Porn” (Interview with Mireille Miller-Young), *Spread* 5.1 (Summer 2009), 45.

¹³ *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women*, curated by David Zwirner, New York, NY, May 1 – June 12, 1993.

¹⁴ See Ara Osterweil, “‘Absently Enchanted’: The Apocryphal, Ecstatic Cinema of Barbara Rubin” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Robin Blaetz, “Introduction,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ Curated for Pleasure Dome Film and Video, August 2, 2008.

¹⁹ Ed Halter, "Interview with M. M. Serra," *SWOON Magazine*, n.d., accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.mmserra.com/interviews.html>.

²⁰ David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 304.

²¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984).

²² Quoted in Julianne Pidduck, "New Queer Cinema and Experimental Video," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 80.

²³ William C. Wees, "Peggy's Playhouse: Contesting the Modernist Paradigm," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 304.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁵ For more on Brechtian distancing see, for instance, John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2004).

²⁶ Style, here and throughout, refers mainly to shot construction, editing, mise-en-scene, and narration. For instance, I will examine the use (or not) of close-ups of genitalia and genital contact, the construction of shots to focus (or not) on the woman's body at the exclusion of the man's (common in mainstream hetero porn), the relative importance of costuming and set design, the angle and duration of shots (whether they work to "cut up" a woman's body, for instance), and the primacy of narrative versus sexual numbers.

²⁷ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 257.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Ibid., 261.

³⁰ These are the primary stereotypes of Asian/American femininity discussed in *The Hypersexuality of Race*.

³¹ As of May 2014, the official release of this compilation is forthcoming.

³² David James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 335-6.

³³ J. Hoberman, "Personal Best," *The Village Voice*, (3 May 1983). Reprinted as "Teen Angel" in *Vulgar Modernism: Writings on Movies and Other Media*, Ed. J. Hoberman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 141-2.

³⁴ Joseph Klarl, "Barbara Rubin: Christmas on Earth," *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, February 5, 2013, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/barbara-rubin-christmas-on-earth>.

³⁵ Ara Osterweil, "Absently Enchanted," 130.

³⁶ Daniel Belasco, "Barbara Rubin: The Vanished Prodigy," *Art*Signal/Monographics* Issue 0 (May 2007), 50.

³⁷ Arthur Rimbaud, "Morning" (*A Season in Hell*), *Rimbaud: Poems (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets)*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994), 248.

³⁸ "Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*," *Boo-Hooray Archives*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.boo-hooray.com/christmas-on-earth-barbara-rubin/>.

³⁹ Ara Osterweil, "Absently Enchanted," 135.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁴¹ Ibid., 136.

⁴² Ibid., 135-6.

⁴³ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 (1989)), 93.

⁴⁴ Ara Osterweil, "Absently Enchanted," 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁶ Osterweil does not explain in her essay why a single frame can be said to have patriarchal inflections, nor why a double-screen projection would resist them.

⁴⁷ Schneemann, quoted in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, Vol 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988-2005), 142.

⁴⁸ MM Serra and Kathryn Ramey, "Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 113.

⁴⁹ Ara Osterweil, "Absently Enchanted," 139.

⁵⁰ *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism* (2009), dir. Virginie Despentes, prod. Morgane Production, Pink TV, Centre National de la Cinematographie (CNC), distr. Dissidenz International.

⁵¹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

⁵² Ibid., 32-3.

⁵³ As mentioned in the introduction, the text was originally published in 1974, and has subsequently been revised twice. The second edition was published in 1979.

Schneemann is not addressed as a filmmaker in her own right – and then only in a brief mention – until the third edition, in 2002.

⁵⁴ Schneemann, quoted in Aviva Rahmani, “A Conversation on Censorship with Carolee Schneemann,” in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 148.

⁵⁵ Aviva Rahmani, “A Conversation on Censorship with Carolee Schneeman,” 147.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁷ MM Serra and Kathryn Ramey, “Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann,” 112.

⁵⁸ David James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 339.

⁵⁹ Several of my interview subjects, including Tasha Reign and Jessica Drake, have emphasized this.

⁶⁰ Former porn performer Candida Royalle founded Femme Productions and began to produce and distribute her own pornography in 1984.

⁶¹ David James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 319.

⁶² Chuck Kleinhans, “Barbara Hammer: Lyrics and History,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 171.

⁶³ Honey Lee Cottrell, interview by author, phone recording, March 7, 2014. According to Cottrell, the performer wished for her identity to remain anonymous and requested that she not be credited (rather than use a pseudonym).

⁶⁴ Honey Lee Cottrell, email correspondence with the author, (March 13, 2014).

⁶⁵ Honey Lee Cottrell, interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Directors in the mainstream porn industry are often paid a one-time fee for their work, so they do not necessarily own their content, but a number of female pornographers (including Diana DeVoe) also own production companies or websites and thus do retain ownership of their work.

⁷² Honey Lee Cottrell, interview.

⁷³ “Mission, Goals, & History,” *Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality*, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.iashs.edu/history.html>.

⁷⁴ Honey Lee Cottrell, interview.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Richard Dyer, “Lesbian/Woman: Lesbian Cultural Feminist Film,” *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003 (1990)), 198.

⁷⁷ <http://goodbyegauleymountain.org/>.

⁷⁸ Annie Sprinkle, interview by author, phone recording, February 25, 2013.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “About *Destriicted*,” *Destriicted Films*, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.destriictedfilms.com/us/about.php>

⁸¹ Annie Sprinkle, interview.

⁸² Marina Abramovic, "Interviews and Documentatation, 1987-2009" (video installation), *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present* (retrospective), Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 14-May 30, 2010.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Isabella Rossellini, "Behind the Scenes (*Green Porno* Season 2)" (video interview), <http://www.sundance.tv/series/green-porno/videos/isabella-rossellini-green-porno-season-2-behind-the-scenes>.

⁸⁷ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁸⁸ Honey Lee Cottrell, interview.

⁸⁹ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 127-8.

⁹⁰ Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 2.

⁹¹ Even that is debatable, as the film does not necessarily suggest that women (or, more specifically, lesbians) have a unique or exclusive relationship to the natural world.

⁹² Eithne Johnson, "Loving Yourself: The Specular Scene in Sexual Self-Help Advice for Women," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 225.

⁹³ Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 48.

⁹⁴ Eithne Johnson, "Loving Yourself," 219.

⁹⁵ William C. Wees. "Peggy's Playhouse," 291.

⁹⁶ For more on the history and uses of found footage, see Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁹⁷ Maureen Turim, "Sounds, Intervals, and Startling Images in the Films of Abigail Child," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 276.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁹⁹ Heather Butler, "What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 168.

¹⁰⁰ MM Serra, "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations."

¹⁰¹ Maureen Turim, "Sounds, Intervals, and Startling Images in the Films of Abigail Child," 277, 275.

¹⁰² Curated for Dortmund: "Serra has chosen works by women film directors from the American avantgarde film scene of the last 30 years, films which examine desire and the representation of female sexuality." From "Coming to Power – American AvantGarde," *Femme Totale*, accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.femmetotale.de/ftalt/coming_e.htm.

¹⁰³ "Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations."

¹⁰⁴ Scott MacDonald, "Peggy Ahwesh" (interview), *Millennium Film Journal* 39–40, (2003), 25-6.

¹⁰⁵ William C. Wees. "Peggy's Playhouse," 304.

¹⁰⁶ MM Serra, interview by author, phone recording, March 9, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ MM Serra, interview.

¹⁰⁸ MM Serra, “Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations.”

¹⁰⁹ MM Serra, interview.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Madison Young, interview by author, phone recording, November 9, 2010.

¹¹³ Eithne Johnson, “Box of Laughter: An Interview with Maria Beatty,” *Masquerade: An Erotic Journal* (1998), reprinted at “Press,” *Bleu Productions*, accessed May 10, 2011, <http://www.bleuproductionsonline.com/press/box-of-laughter.html>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ MM Serra, interview.

¹¹⁶ Maria Beatty, “Maria Beatty: Interview by Thomas Roche,” *Eros Zine*, reprinted at “Press,” *Bleu Productions*, accessed May 10, 2011, http://www.bleuproductions.com/press/MARIA_BEATTY_Erozine_2_19_08.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ As I will discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters, obscenity law has historically led mainstream producers to avoid juxtaposing violence (even the consensual “violence” of BDSM) with hardcore sex.

¹²¹ Maria Beatty, “Maria Beatty: Interview by Thomas Roche.”

¹²² MM Serra, interview.

¹²³ Jacky St. James, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, August 28, 2013.

¹²⁴ I heard this idea from several interview subjects, including Jacky St. James, Jessica Drake, and Adella Curry.

¹²⁵ Jessica Drake, mentioned during “Porn, Prostitution, and Empowerment: The Politics of Censorship” (Panel), The Social Awareness Network for Activism through Art, University of California, Los Angeles, February 18, 2014.

¹²⁶ Marne Lucas, interview by author, phone recording, January 21, 2009.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Jack Sargeant, “Hot Zones: The Operation” (Interview with Jacob Pander and Marne Lucas), *Suture: The Arts Journal* v. 1 (1998), 64.

¹³⁰ Marne Lucas, interview.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ *Incident Energy* (funded in part by a Regional Art & Culture Council 2012-2013 Project Grant) premiered at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, Portland, OR, (September 20 – October 13, 2013).

¹³⁹ From a statement published on the profile of “Jacob Pander and Marne Lucas” on *Art Slant*, <http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/193876-jacob-pander-and-marne-lucas>.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Speer, “Marne Lucas and Jacob Pander” (Editorial), *Visual Art Source*, n.d., accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.visualartsource.com/index.php?page=editorial&aID=1886>.

¹⁴¹ Marjorie Sturm, interview by author, email, June 23, 2006.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Kathleen McHugh, “The Experimental ‘Dunyementary’: A Cinematic Signature Effect,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, Ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 339.

¹⁴⁵ Kathleen McHugh, “The Experimental ‘Dunyementary’: A Cinematic Signature Effect,” 340.

¹⁴⁶ “Mommy Is Coming,” *TLA Releasing*, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://tlareleasing.com/about-tla/>.

¹⁴⁷ From the DVD cover, *Mommy Is Coming* (2012, TLA Releasing).

¹⁴⁸ Here I quote the film’s marketing rhetoric from *TLA Releasing*.

¹⁴⁹ This is clear from the general proliferation of incest-themed videos, and also from the testimony of filmmakers like Jacky St. James (who has produced a number of incest titles) and Rebekah Nazarian.

¹⁵⁰ Michel Foucault's term for "the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations," in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 (1976)), 140.

¹⁵¹ I use "trans" to refer to transgender men and women, and "trans*" to refer to a broader identity category, encompassing all non-cisgender identities (including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, gender fluid, non-binary, genderless, agender, non-gender, two-spirit, third gender, bi-gender, and trans men and trans women).

¹⁵² <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/spotlights/outfest-ucla-legacy-project-sexperimental-1992-2001>.

¹⁵³ The film compilation is not currently available to the public, but she shared a private link with me.

¹⁵⁴ Kadet Kuhne's website, "About," *Tektonic Shift*, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.tektonicshift.com/about/>.

¹⁵⁵ David James, "The Distinction of Idioms: Non-Industrial Film in Los Angeles," in *Scratching the Belly of the Beast: Cutting Edge Media in Los Angeles, 1922-94*, Los Angeles Filmforum (1994), 36.

¹⁵⁶ Among other links, experimental filmmakers (such as Jonas Mekas) have often supplemented their income by working in Hollywood, doubtless contributing to shaping its aesthetic and narrative traditions along the way.

¹⁵⁷ Annie Sprinkle, interview.

¹⁵⁸ Maria Beatty, "Maria Beatty: Interview by Thomas Roche."

CHAPTER 2

The Softer Side of Hardcore? Women Filmmakers, Constrained Agency, and Feminist Possibilities in the Mainstream US Porn Industry

If we want to create change we can't just stand within the periphery but need to interject ourselves into their machine. – Madison Young

I know she can take it. She's a good actress. And I can abuse somebody that I know [...] And at the end I give her a hug, I take her out to dinner, and we go shopping. – Lizzy Borden

“Not after your class.”¹ This was the blunt reply I received, to my dismay, when I asked Tasha Reign, as I do all of my interview subjects, whether she identifies as a feminist. In addition to a porn actress and filmmaker, Tasha had been my student at UCLA in a course I taught on Sex and the Cinema, and I was initially horrified to think that I might somehow have turned her – a Women’s Studies major – off of feminism! But in her subsequent explanation, it became clear that her confusion was definitional; she assumed there to be only one type of feminist, and concluded that her perspective and her work did not fit within it. It is this notion – and its regular appearances in the exclusionary and prescriptive discourses that can accompany discussions of feminist porn – that I would like to address in this chapter, as I evaluate the contributions of women filmmakers to the mainstream US porn industry, and assess the feminist possibilities of porn made by filmmakers whose agency is constrained by the dictates of industrial pornography, and who may or may not self-identify as feminist.

Many of these filmmakers express motivations beyond the purely economic for wanting to direct or produce as well as or instead of performing. Some, like Mika Tan, seek to challenge the status quo, bringing overlooked groups of people, sexualities, sex acts, or body types to light; some seek to make porn that creates a “safe space” for women viewers, to create a more

romantic or egalitarian vision of sex, or even an educational experience – as a huge subset of so-called couples porn (that is, porn marketed to straight women and couples) consists of instructional videos, focusing on such topics as how to perform oral sex or penetrate your male partner with a strap-on. Some filmmakers, on the other hand, in making extreme hardcore porn, seek to prove that they can go far beyond the soft focus of couples porn. Some seek to fund their art-making through their porn or to break down the boundaries between art and porn. Others simply seek to take a leadership role in the production of the same sort of porn through which they have branded themselves as actresses. Perhaps the most common motivation is the desire for control over one's own images and ideas. For Jacky St. James, who started out as a screenwriter, for instance, the appeal of directing her own work was indisputable; she sought full creative control.

This latter motivation, too, is arguably feminist. It may be individualist, neoliberal choice feminism that filmmakers like St. James espouse, but I would argue that the phenomenon of so many women finding ways to control their own images (with constraints) is meaningful. They contribute, if not as overtly as more politically motivated filmmakers, to increasing the diversity of the industry's output, and the increasing number of women finding ways to direct suggests that their combined efforts have succeeded in opening up avenues of access for future women filmmakers. Both Diana DeVoe and Aurora Snow, for instance, told me that the number of women filmmakers in the industry is always on the rise. For DeVoe, "It's nice to see that there are more of them now than at any other time. And I like to take a little credit for that."² Snow told me that, when she started to direct, in 2004, "there were very, very few female directors. [...] Looking back, I think that, [...] by my directing and having my movies do so well, I probably helped pave the way for other female directors."³ I think that this is most

certainly true of all women directors whose work sells well. They demonstrate to industry players that porn created by women can be lucrative. Regardless of whether or not it is any given woman filmmaker's intent – and, in most cases, it decidedly is not – to help “pave the way” for other women to take creative control from behind the camera, that they nonetheless achieve that is significant from a feminist perspective.

Women's roles behind the camera in Porn Valley can tell us much about the gender politics of the industry – much that is elided when the discussion is limited either to women's supposed exploitation in front of the camera or to women's feminist empowerment behind the camera in production cultures outside of the mainstream. These filmmakers' views on the representation of women in their films and on the treatment of the women performing in them vary widely and seem to depend, in large part, on the path that brought each of them to directing. Women who entered the industry with no directorial ambitions tend to view the gender politics of the industry as already egalitarian, or even as favoring women, since the opportunities to direct often seemed to present themselves spontaneously after they had built up enough star power as performers. Women who wanted to direct from the beginning, however, in many cases found that they could not find the means to do so without first performing, and thus they tend to describe the gender politics of the industry as problematic or outright misogynistic. Performer-directors are slightly more likely to be concerned about performer comfort and safety than filmmakers who do not also work as performers, but there are exceptions to that rule; including Tristan Taormino, a filmmaker with the utmost concern for her performers, and Lizzy Borden, a performer-director with a general lack thereof. Whether or not a woman director considers the politics of representation in her work tends to correlate less to the individual's path of access to

directing, and more to her personal politics – specifically whether she identifies as feminist – and other aspects of her background.

Tasha Reign, for instance, had become a Women’s Studies major first, and a porn director second. In the course of our interview, it became clear that she had entered my course a proponent of so-called choice feminism, or what Hilary Radner describes as “neo-feminism.” And some of our readings and class discussions – specifically an excerpt of Radner’s book on *Neo-feminist Cinema and the Rise of the Girly Film* – had called aspects of that philosophy into question. Choice feminism, or neo-feminism, centers on the idea that all of women’s choices should be considered valid. These “choices” tend to be deeply entrenched within the late capitalist system of commodity fetishism and its imperative to create and consolidate “individual” identities through conspicuous consumption. Thus, porn consumers (or producers) can express their “choices” through purchasing (or selling) porn that reflects their own individual desires. Choice feminism ultimately reifies individual choice, often via the marketplace, at the expense of collective action toward social change, and is further problematic in that it assumes that all women have equal access to all choices and that all choices are created equal. In this sense, it can be said to have more in common with neoliberalism than with any sort of politically engaged feminism.

If one’s choice – say, for a woman to wear lipstick and high heels – just so happens to align perfectly with what’s generally considered socially acceptable for one’s gender assignment, then that choice will be a relatively easy one to implement. If, however, one chooses to challenge those norms, choice feminism does not provide the tools with which to address the obstacles that one would inevitably face as a result – the systemic and institutionalized sexism, racism, homophobia, able-ism, classism, etc., that furthermore deny many women access to a full

range of choices in the first place. This is precisely the kind of blind spot that enables someone like Reign to suggest that the adult video industry is entirely progressive in its gender politics. As a straight-identified, white, blonde, cis-gendered, slim and able-bodied young woman from an affluent background, she has privilege that grants her much easier access to the means of production than she would otherwise have. And although she does acknowledge some aspects of this privilege, she ultimately concludes that it is her individual personality traits that have enabled her access to creative control.

In line with Radner's ideas about neofeminism and its expression in the "girly film," throughout our interview, Reign referred to herself as "girly" on several occasions. And that same day, I had visited her set as she shot a scene for her latest film, entitled *Girly Girls Like to Fuck*. So it should not be terribly surprising that Radner's article might have caused this insightful student to rethink her own status as a feminist. Her porn is in many ways quite conventional, but she does describe one of her films in particular (a work in progress) as both girly and potentially feminist in the sense that it has, as she puts it, "an underlying team message of girls embracing their sexuality, being together, working as a team."⁴ In this description of her own porn, there is some hint of a broader definition of feminism at work here – she doesn't stop at suggesting that the women in her film are sexually empowered on an individual level. They are also empowered by "working as a team." And while that team is undoubtedly not fighting to overthrow the patriarchy, it nonetheless gestures toward the need for support systems and collective action. And as Julia Serano usefully points out in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, there are at least two forms of sexism operating broadly in American society that affect our reception and understanding of femininity: oppositional, which "functions to legitimize feminine expressions in women and to delegitimize

feminine expressions in men (and vice versa for masculinity),” and traditional, which “functions to make femaleness and femininity subordinate to maleness and masculinity.”⁵ In the latter sense, the proud reclamation of feminine traits as empowering can arguably constitute a feminist act.

In 2006, when I first began working on this project, feminist porn was more a theory than a practice. Few people were writing about or even discussing it, and the assumption was that even fewer were actually creating it. In recent years, however, the concept that porn can be feminist has become something of a hot topic in both academic and popular arenas. To wit, I presented an excerpt of this chapter at the first annual Feminist Porn Conference at the University of Toronto on April 6, 2013. The conference attended the publication of *The Feminist Porn Book* (edited by three prominent UCSB professors and one feminist pornographer) and each has created a bit of a stir in mainstream media over the very idea that porn could be feminist. In their introduction to *The Feminist Porn Book*, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Mireille Miller-Young, and Tristan Taormino define their subject thus:

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 homonormativity. 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.⁶

This definition delineates a subgenre of thoughtful, engaged, and potentially egalitarian pornography. Almost by definition, the filmmakers who make this kind of “alternative” porn, with the notable exception of Taormino herself, primarily work on the margins or outside of the mainstream industry. Indeed their work is defined “in contrast to norms in the mainstream sectors of the adult entertainment industry.”⁷ In this chapter, I would like to add to the conversation pornography directed by women that does not fit within the above parameters but that nonetheless raises important questions for feminists and film scholars. The high percentage of women filmmakers working in the mainstream porn industry is also a feminist phenomenon – advancing equality for women, in terms of creating opportunities for professional advancement and/or higher wages, and/or access to greater creative control – even when the pornography that they create is either ambiguously so or not at all.

The above definition would exclude Reign’s porn, for instance, because the kind of “girl power” her films depict and the choice feminism that she espouses both fall short of its radical politics. It is fair to say that feminist porn exists as a subgenre of porn, and that Reign’s simply should not be categorized within it, and yet that should not preclude thinking about her films’ feminist potential. So, for my purposes, it is useful to distinguish between feminist porn, the alternative subgenre and accompanying political movement, and feminist pornography, the phenomenon, which can potentially be applied to work that falls outside of the subgenre. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the latter, though with reference to work that complicates distinctions between feminist porn and the rest of porn.

Unlike Linda Williams in *Hard Core*, the editors of *The Feminist Porn Book* do not necessarily assume that feminist porn replaces “the monopoly on the sexual subjectivity that [the] phallus stands for, its monolithic symbolization of desire.”⁸ They have shifted the debate to focus primarily on inclusion and diversity of sexual expression, and while this functions to challenge the current male-oriented monopoly over sexual expression in the mainstream adult video industry, feminist porn as it is defined in *The Feminist Porn Book* is not necessarily non- or anti-phallic. Nonetheless, they are in agreement with Williams that feminist porn should in some way provide an alternative to the monolithic images of sexuality espoused by most of the mainstream industry.

I have found that nearly all of the women filmmakers in the mainstream industry are, in one way or another, doing this. They insist that their porn provides something different from the norm, sometimes radically so, and sometimes quite subtly. Their motivations vary, as they arrive at their decisions to work behind the camera for a variety of reasons. Some, like Sinnamon Love and Mika Tan, are concerned with the politics of representation, with regard to gender, race, sexuality, and other identity categories, and/or with instituting ethical production practices, but in most cases, their motivations are more individualistic. They want to create porn with artistic or narrative integrity, or to take control of their own images, or to empower themselves economically. They work under constraints that differ significantly from those of women directing or producing independent, alternative, or queer porn – the categories into which most overtly feminist porn falls – and in some cases, they don’t view those constraints as problematic.

For my purposes, I am defining as “mainstream” any pornography that is marketed primarily to straight men (and secondarily to straight women and couples), created by one of the larger production companies (including studios that predominantly create couples-oriented

pornography, like Wicked and Vivid, in addition to those that primarily market to a male audience, like Evil Angel or Hustler), and distributed by one of the major distribution companies. These distributors sell product to major online retailers like *adultdvd.com*, as well as to brick-and-mortar adult video stores domestically and abroad, and/or to cable channels and hotel networks. Many mainstream porn production studios are extremely small when compared to major Hollywood studios, but some are quite large and completely vertically integrated, like Larry Flynt Publications, which owns everything right up the line from print publications (most famously *Hustler*), to porn production companies, to websites, retail stores, and clubs.⁹

The adult video industry is vast, complex, and variegated, and its workings are difficult to categorize. “Mainstream” and “independent,” both of which I discuss here, involve different constraints and labor practices. Performer safety and comfort, for instance, are typically a priority in independently produced feminist porn, but not always on mainstream porn sets. That being said, Tristan Taormino, one of the above-mentioned co-editors of *The Feminist Porn Book*, herself works within the mainstream: she is a contract director for Vivid, one of the largest studios in the business. And, although they work under greater creative constraints and thus tend to produce less radical film content (with the notable exception of Taormino), women filmmakers in mainstream porn do important work, even when the specific texts that they create have problematic aspects. They help to illuminate the gender politics of the industry, and they signal relatively new forms of access and agency available to women in the field of adult video production.

The cover of the April 2014 issue of *Adult Video News (AVN)* highlights a feature story, “Directors Uncut: Adult storytellers share their secrets,” profiling twelve writer/directors.¹⁰ Notably, it focuses on eight women and only four men.¹¹ It is difficult to imagine a profile of

Hollywood directors that would feature twice as many women as men. There could be any number of reasons why the article focuses on this disproportionate number of women – and disproportionate it is, in terms of sheer numbers, despite women directors’ notable and ever-increasing contributions to adult video production. Perhaps this is simply the sample of subjects that the author, Jason Lyon, ended up with, after attempting to contact a range of filmmakers. Perhaps he intentionally focused on women out of an assumption that the (largely straight male) *AVN* readership is more interested in reading about women. Or it could be due to his focus on “storytelling,” specifically; women filmmakers are thought to be more likely to create story-driven porn. Regardless, the focus on women filmmakers in an article not specifically about women directors signals the increasingly significant presence of women behind the camera in contemporary adult video.

Indeed, women directors comprise a far more significant share of the overall number of filmmakers in mainstream pornography than in the Hollywood film industry, especially if we focus on popular and high-grossing titles. Using 2013 as a sample, I compared monthly box office reports from *Variety* to monthly top selling DVD charts from *AVN Magazine*, and from there determined the number of women filmmakers with films in the top ten in each month.¹² The results are telling: twenty-one films directed solely by women were featured in the top ten in the twelve months of 2013, versus three Hollywood films.¹³ (If we include *Frozen*, which was co-directed by Jennifer Lee, and *Movie 43*, an anthology film for which Elizabeth Banks directed one of eleven segments, that number grows to five.) Another avenue for comparison is the major awards nominations at each industry’s premiere awards event, the AVN Awards and the Academy Awards, respectively.¹⁴ Taking the 2013 awards as a case study, in Hollywood, only one American woman – Kathryn Bigelow – was the sole director of any film nominated in any

category for an Academy Award, and she was not nominated for Best Direction. If we include women who co-directed feature-length animated or documentary films, that number goes up to five. Meanwhile, thirty-one male directors' (non-foreign) films were nominated. In the Major Awards categories (that is, excluding the 100+ "additional awards" categories and the foreign film categories) of the AVN Awards, on the other hand, twelve women directors had films nominated – in many cases, multiple films – versus forty-seven male directors. So women directors comprise approximately 20% of filmmakers whose films were nominated for AVN Major Awards.

In contrast, even if we include the women who co-directed documentaries, women comprise only 14% of filmmakers whose work was recognized by the Academy in 2013. If we focus only on the women working within Hollywood proper, that number shrinks to 6%. If we compare Best Direction, there was not a single woman nominated for an Oscar in 2013, and only one woman (Kathryn Bigelow again) has ever won a Best Direction award, in the history of the Academy Awards. Meanwhile, in 2013, four women were nominated out of the fifteen total nominees for Director of the Year at the AVN Awards – 0% versus 27%. (And despite its association with an industry notorious for racist depictions and practices, the AVN Awards, while still overwhelmingly recognizing white filmmakers' work, did however recognize five black and Latino men and one Latina director with nominations in Major Awards categories.)

Despite its providing a welcoming environment for women filmmakers – relative to Hollywood, anyway – the porn industry is assumed, in the popular imaginary, to have exploitative production practices. In some cases, this is true, but nearly all of the women filmmakers that I have interviewed insisted that they offer safe, comfortable, ethical working environments for their performers, and performers to whom I've spoken have confirmed that. At

the keynote panel for the First Annual Feminist Porn Conference, Tristan Taormino called upon the audience to demand the kind of “organic, free trade porn” that she makes:

We have to make connections between fair labor practices even when the labor being performed is sex. If you care about the conditions under which your food was made and the conditions under which your jeans were made, then you should care about the conditions under which your pornography is made. You should be willing to pay a little more.¹⁵

Here she has shifted the focus of the debate from what is represented in porn to the production practices and working conditions under which it is made, and the sentiment is well taken. At the same time, her call to action unintentionally reproduces the capitalist logics of choice feminism. There is an unexamined privilege that she assumes on behalf of her viewers, and this points to one of the problems with the neoliberal model of voting with one’s wallet. The idea is that fair trade inevitably costs more, but who is priced out of this system? How do viewers who cannot afford to spend the \$20-35 that Taormino charges for each of her DVDs on her website (puckerup.com) support the concept of feminist porn?

While the demands for ethically produced porn are difficult to argue with, when the argument is shifted from production contexts back to representation, prescriptive definitions of feminist porn can move into a more problematic grey area, in which desires are potentially policed. Indeed, if one were to focus on a given film’s content rather than the contexts of its production, some of the work profiled in *The Feminist Porn Book* would not necessarily fit the editors’ definitions – Sinnamon Love, for instance, identifies as a feminist and expresses articulate concerns about wanting to expand the available images of black women’s sexuality, but as I will discuss below, she nonetheless has only directed a film that fits rather comfortably

within the mainstream designation: *My Black Ass* 4. Furthermore, as will become clear, some women who do not necessarily identify as feminist and make porn that, based on its content, would not necessarily be identified as feminist by Taormino, nonetheless do create this kind of “fair trade porn” in the sense of providing fair wages and taking performers’ personal preferences and comfort into account.

Beyond her personal politics, Taormino has branded herself as a feminist pornographer, at least partly because it has been highly profitable for her to do so. Jennifer Miller, in her article “Kink Unbound(?): Pursuing Pleasure and Profit in Pornography,” argues that all pornography – including alternative and presumably, though she doesn’t use the term, feminist porn – “is a commodity that reproduces capitalist logics while appealing to essentialist claims about sexuality to ‘authenticate’ the product being marketed for consumption.”¹⁶ Pornography, whenever it is profit-driven, will always be overdetermined and constrained by market imperatives. Like mainstream pornographers, feminist, queer, and alternative pornographers certainly exploit the long-starved and devoted niche markets to whom they cater, at least in the sense of framing and marketing their products in such a way as to make it as appealing as possible to the consumers whose financial support make their continued porn production possible. This is worth remembering, before one takes any given product or producer’s claims for “authenticity,” or other such marketing rhetoric, at face value. But if we are to dismiss all pornography in this way, we must dismiss all media in this way – no American media representation can entirely escape capitalist logics because it has always been created within a capitalist system.

We must move past such blanket characterizations and wholesale dismissals to consider individual texts and producers on their own terms. “If profit is the motivating force behind the formation of a community, any social critique produced within that space is only capable of

scratching the surface,”¹⁷ Miller writes, and while I agree with the sentiment, I would also insist that we consider the rather conspicuous “If” that begins it. We should not presume to know the motivations of any given cultural producer. Taormino, for instance, may be at least as driven by a desire to disrupt the conventional politics of representation and enact social change, or to express her own artistic vision, as she is motivated by profit. Indeed she claims to be so. Rather than merely talk *about* women in pornography, and thus continue the cycle of objectification and obfuscation that renders female subjects voiceless, I have spoken *to* a number of women filmmakers, to learn about their own perspectives on their work, their experiences, and the gender politics of the porn industry. While I recognize that these filmmakers have been influenced by capitalist logics and market imperatives – often on a subconscious level, and perhaps more so than feminist filmmakers working independently – and as such, I perform discourse analysis to assess their claims, I refuse to disregard those claims outright.

Much important work is done from the margins, but disseminating feminist ideas – however watered down, and whether or not they are identified as such – to a broader audience certainly serves a useful function as well. As feminist pornographer Madison Young puts it, “If we want to create change we can’t just stand within the periphery but need to interject ourselves into their machine.”¹⁸ Some filmmakers, like Taormino, manage to do this in overt ways. The films that she makes for Vivid, one of the industry’s largest and most lucrative studios, fit comfortably within the genre of feminist porn. Her work is something of an anomaly, however. Young creates her own porn independently, outside of the mainstream industry. She interjects herself “into their machine” as a performer and through the mainstream distribution deal she has with Pulse, but although we should not dismiss the very real power that women can exert from within a scene, the enacting of her full creative vision, it seems, can only be realized outside of

the machine. Working in more commercial porn creates constraints and complications, she says, by making it harder to stay authentic and true to “your values and mission statement.”¹⁹

Women filmmakers working in the mainstream industry, with its attendant constraints, often do not identify as feminist or create the kind of porn that would be considered for a Feminist Porn Award.²⁰ In her contribution to *The Feminist Porn Book*, feminist porn pioneer Candida Royalle comments on a broad swath of these filmmakers: “Rather than creating a new vision,” she writes, “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.”²¹ Here Royalle generalizes about the porn made by women whose work and sensibilities diverge dramatically from her own. Her statement seems to imply that these filmmakers, in trying to out-boy the boys through increasingly “extreme” imagery – that is, of rough or violent sex acts, frequently involving degradation of women through rhetoric (“dirty whore,” “cum dumpster,” and the like) or behavior (for instance, blow jobs that cause women to choke, tear up, or even vomit) – are not creating authentic expressions of their own female sexual desires. Tasha Reign, however, describes the porn that she enjoys as a consumer as significantly “nastier” than the porn that she actually makes as a producer. Because she has branded herself as a “girly girl” in her performances, distributors apparently expect the porn she directs to avoid extreme imagery. So if her porn is in any way inauthentic in terms of its ability to express her feminine desire, it is in roughly the opposite of the way that Royalle suggests.

Indeed, several women filmmakers have expressed feeling censored, not for wanting to show more traditionally feminine images or perspectives, but rather for having visions or fantasies considered too “extreme” by male producers and/or studio heads. Jacky St. James told me that she would like to make rougher porn, but that the studio she works for, New Sensations,

primarily targets couples and, in order to create product that adheres to the distributor's guidelines, places limitations on filmmakers:

I would like to go much more hardcore. [...] Nothing violent, but I think much more manipulative and almost sadistic from a psychological aspect. An example I'll give is, for this bondage movie, I wanted to go and push the envelope a little bit further, but one of our distributors has very specific rules on what we can and cannot do. That wasn't coming from my boss, but obviously my boss says, "You have to adhere to the standards of X distributor." And when the distributor's like, "No, she can't be gagged," or "She can't do this," or whatever, it kind of limits you. So it was a very tame bondage movie.²²

She further clarifies that, although a film marketed to couples may include light BDSM themes or content, "If you spank a girl in our movie, you can't show the red spot on her butt." It is significant that St. James uses the female pronoun to describe the objects of every instance of censorship by the distributor. Performers' of all genders face regulation of their bodies in the form of mandatory sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing and of their work in the form of obscenity law, but it is women's bodies that are regulated most clearly and directly in mainstream pornography, in this case as a protective measure – purportedly to protect the women themselves, but in fact to protect the distributors and the studios against obscenity charges and/or the potential loss of customers. Since the 1970s, anti-porn feminists have critiqued the industry for its control and depiction of women's bodies, but ironically, in their attempts to prevent the exploitation of women (or, more cynically, to avoid offending a potential market share), studios that cater to couples simply exert new forms of biopower over women's bodies and subjectivities when they suggest that a woman filmmaker or performer cannot enact certain fantasies or depict the bodily results of certain sex acts.

Jessica Drake similarly mentioned that Wicked Pictures had asked her to pare down the number of “facials” (male ejaculation on a partner’s face) that she includes in her porn.²³ Facials are an industry standard, but since Wicked also caters to the women and couples market, the powers that be base their guidelines for content on assumptions about what women would or would not want to see. Adella Curry explains that producers and distributors perform market research “in a very general way,” by keeping track of top-selling titles and “most searched for stars, fetishes, etc.,” and VOD companies and e-retailers such as DVD Empire keep “good records on who is purchasing.”²⁴ From there, they generalize about what consumers are interested in seeing. Meanwhile, Drake insists, “I did facials before I got in the business,” preempting any possible accusations that she has been brainwashed by the industry, though she did also admit that, “a lot of the time we lose perspective.”²⁵

On the one hand, we might ask the ultimately unanswerable question of to what extent Drake’s tastes may have been overdetermined by the pornography that she claims to have watched avidly as a fan before her own entry into the industry. Furthermore, facials clearly do reinforce masculinist sexual frameworks and power dynamics, and beyond that are simply so ubiquitous in mainstream pornography as to be a cliché. But regardless of its origins, Drake’s desire to shoot, experience, and watch facials is regulated by the patriarchally organized studio where she works. She believes that she can legitimately shoot a facial from a “woman’s perspective” – that is, in a way that she and her female performers find satisfying – but she is asked to adjust her perspective to cater to men’s ideas about women’s desires. The censoring of Drake’s desires by corporate executives happens to align perfectly with the feminist critiques of facials by cultural critics like Gail Dines and filmmakers like Royalle.

This is not to say that feminist critiques of the ubiquity of facials, and the extent to which they symbolize the primacy of male pleasure in mainstream porn, are not perfectly valid. In interrogating these critiques, I seek only to consider the subtler biopower that is exerted over women filmmakers and actresses who seek to make rough, masculinist, or even violent pornography, and to locate the potential for feminist or at least anti-sexist images and ideas in the kind of porn that may at first glance appear typical, no different from the vast majority of overtly male-centric pornography. If we scratch past the surface of porn made by women that does not fit the accepted definitions of feminist porn, we sometimes find some rather surprising representations of female strength and solidarity, and/or diversity of gender expression, race or ethnicity, or body type.

The first question that I receive, almost without fail, upon revealing my dissertation topic to someone I meet, is an incredulous, “Are there many women porn directors?” The answer is yes, and the number is only increasing as the couples market continues to expand, but this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Perhaps ironically, the co-director of the most notorious pseudo-porno of all time²⁶ went on to become the first female pornographer. Roberta Findlay, with her husband Michael, co-directed the film that became *Snuff* (1976), which Beverly LaBelle, for instance, credits with single-handedly making “the misogyny of pornography a major concern” for feminists in the 1970s.²⁷ Of course, *Snuff* is neither a real snuff film nor actual hardcore pornography; it is strictly exploitation cinema. But Findlay did go on to direct a number of hardcore features on her own, and she and Doris Wishman are but the first in a long line of women to be written out of histories of pornography, by cultural commentators, producers, and feminists alike. *The Feminist Porn Book* doesn’t mention her; like Linda Williams in *Hard Core*, the authors list Royalle as the first feminist pornographer. Before going on to become

such, however, Royale had appeared in one of Findlay's films back in 1976. A distinction should of course be made between the first female pornographer and the first feminist pornographer, but Findlay's contributions as an early porn pioneer deserve a place in histories of pornography.²⁸

There are two ways in which work by women like Findlay can be recuperated for its feminist potential: on the level of production, or on the level of representation. In terms of the latter, Findlay's films turned many stereotypes on their head before they had even been fully solidified. Before there was "porn for women" against which to define the rest of porn, there was Findlay making violent, disturbing "porn with a woman's sensibilities."²⁹ Findlay's perspective about the need to depict female pleasure does align with that of many feminist pornographers and *The Feminist Porn Book's* authors and editors: "I suppose women directors would shoot woman [*sic*] having orgasms in addition to shooting men having orgasms. Most male directors don't bother about showing women having orgasms."³⁰ Yet hers is not the soft-lit, romantic couples' fare that popular accounts associate with women's or feminist porn.

As with many of the filmmakers whose work I will discuss here, there is a notable tension between what can be described as feminist potential and the lack thereof, sometimes verging on downright misogyny. With her husband, she co-directed a series of softcore sexploitation features in the late sixties about male serial killers. Findlay has since spoken critically of her ex-husband, Michael, describing him as a "cowardly psychopath" who wanted to murder women but settled for cinematic depictions thereof: "Michael wanted to kill women, but I personally don't like them. I never did. I don't like women and children. They're an annoyance and generally in the way."³¹

So it is not without interest that, in the films she went on to direct herself, she continued to utilize violent narratives but typically featured women in the role of killer. To explain her use of violence, Findlay said:

If there's a script that requires violent scenes – like *The Tiffany Minx* – then I put them in. A woman in *The Tiffany Minx* happens to kill two men. One man is raping her. And then she kills another of her lovers who goes mad while fucking her. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I seem to have a violent nature. [...] I like to see women raped on the screen. A lot of my fantasies are in a picture I made called *Mystique*. It's sort of a metaphysical film dealing with the subjugation of women. I get turned on by the beating of women. Of course, I don't do it in real life. I'm not even a lesbian.³²

Despite the internalized misogyny (and rather strange understanding of what it means to be a lesbian) implied by her expressed loathing for women and her desires to see women raped and beaten, however, Findlay repeatedly depicts the raped and beaten women as fighting back against and ultimately defeating their tormenters through murder. It is tempting to read this as a feminist resistance against depictions of women as helpless victims in pre-1970s horror and sexploitation films. On a small scale, each of her disturbed heroines takes a strike back against the patriarchy, be it with a knife, an axe, or even – akin to Chantal Ackerman's prostitute-housewife heroine Jeanne Dielman³³ – a pair of scissors, as when the title character from *The Tiffany Minx* (1979) dispatches her rapist. As in *Jeanne Dielman...*, the choice of murder weapon cannot be read as incidental. Primarily considered a woman's tool, for sewing and other domestic chores or for educational purposes, the scissors effectively teach the unfortunate male victims their final lesson, about the dangers of constraining and objectifying women.

Unlike their male counterparts in the sexploitation films made by the Findlays, the heroines in Roberta Findlay's hardcore films do not murder out of hatred for another sex or a sheer joy in violence, but rather as a form of retribution or revenge for their own ill-treatment – a torturing of the men in response to the cultural dictate to “torture the women.”³⁴ In *A Woman's Torment* (1977), Karen, a mentally ill woman, is alternately neglected (quite literally as the woman in the attic) and infantilized by her sister and her sister's husband and, left alone one day, wanders away and into an empty beach house. A handyman arrives, perhaps in a nod to the stereotypical narrative formula for porn, and finds her to be easy prey. What starts out as a potentially consensual (to the extent that a woman in her condition is ever capable of consent) sexual encounter quickly progresses toward rape. The tables turn when Karen stabs the handyman-turned-rapist with a knife from the kitchen. As with so many rape revenge narratives, however, the potentially empowering image of a woman fighting back with a kitchen knife – a weapon symbolic of domesticity and “a woman's place” – can never quite erase the specter of the visual pleasure we are expected to have taken in watching her rape in the first place. This is perhaps even more true of adult video than of mainstream (non-adult) cinema, in that the sex scenes – including rape – are designed specifically and overtly to titillate.

The contradictory treatment of women in her cinematic depictions is inevitably reflected in the films' production contexts. Insofar as her films, like *Mystique*, actually reflect her personal fantasies, they could be described as auto-pornographic; but despite her gender, these fantasies apparently involve “the subjugation of women,” a category with which she seems not to identify in a meaningful way, as she claims that she does not “like women.” Findlay's career shift from co-director of sexploitation to sole director of hardcore films bolsters the claims of filmmakers I've interviewed, who insist that the porn industry is friendlier than mainstream

production cultures to women.³⁵ Nearly all of Findlay's semi-mainstream exploitation and softcore work was co-directed with her husband; her solo work is mostly hardcore. At the same time, that she chose one of several male pseudonyms – Robert Nelson, Robert W. Norman, Walter D. Roberts, Robert W. Brinar, or Bob W. Davis – to work under when directing her own hardcore features, as opposed to the female pseudonym – Anna Riva – that she chose for co-directing softcore with her husband, suggests that the gender politics of the porn industry (or of its assumed viewership) were not so amenable to female authorship in a pre-Femme Productions world. Whereas the women filmmakers of today exploit their female personae in order to build and sell a brand, Findlay felt that she had to hide her femininity in order to produce and distribute her work. Possibly, the violent nature of her pornography contributed to her decision to use a male pseudonym – perhaps reflecting societal discomfort with women depicting or liking violent sex, which is gendered masculine.

As we will see, Findlay would be only the first in a surprisingly long line of women directors known for making “extreme” pornography (that is, porn with “extreme” content and/or storylines in which women, and sometimes men, are murdered and/or violently raped), and one of the more recent examples of which intentionally chose a gender-neutral pseudonym as well: Mason. In Hollywood, sex is, of course, the only thing more likely to be censored by the MPAA than violence, and in a genre whose early marketing campaigns employed “XXX” precisely to indicate its transgressions of MPAA regulations, it is unsurprising that violence would sometimes (often, even) cautiously be combined with sex. Due to gendered expectations, it is perhaps more surprising that so many women have made names for themselves by directing especially violent or “extreme” pornography.

Reviewers and cultural commentators have “responded anxiously to a perceived increase in degradation-themed hardcore pornography since the late 1990s. Such porn has been commonly termed ‘extreme,’ intimating that it is excessive even by porn’s illicit standards.”³⁶ “Extreme” may be imposed on a film after the fact by a reviewer or scholar in order to convey its excess, or it may be used intentionally by distributors in marketing rhetoric capitalizing on precisely this reaction – much as the “XXX” label capitalized on the sense of transgression that could only exist through its comparison to the norm of non-X-rated films. The category of extreme porn is thus fluid and unstable. Some of the acts that were received as shocking in the 1990s – such as blow jobs so violent that they lead to the female performer choking or vomiting on the male performer’s penis – have been assimilated into the mainstream, to the point of becoming downright commonplace. “Gagging blowjobs,” as they are more commonly called, have ceased to be designated “extreme.” What constitutes “extreme” is thus always shifting, in a genre that has long prided itself on the transgression of various boundaries, but it always seems to imply (relative to the majority of concurrent porn production) an excess of violence, or of especially rough or degrading sex acts.

In light of the ongoing assimilation of this type of content, it is productive to consider affinities between pornography and another “low” genre: the slasher film. In her groundbreaking study of the slasher film, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover describes the phenomenon of the Final Girl, a tough, masculinized “female victim-hero” who fights off the killer to become the last person standing.³⁷ The Final Girl, according to Clover, can only exist in a film economy in which women must perennially be the victims. “Abject terror,” she writes, in short, is gendered feminine, and the more concerned a given film is with that condition – and it is the essence of modern horror – the more likely the femaleness of the victim. It

is no accident that male victims in slasher films are killed swiftly or offscreen, and that prolonged struggles, in which the victim has time to contemplate her imminent destruction, inevitably figure females.³⁸

Much as the gendered dictates of the slasher genre – “torture the women”³⁹ – ironically allow for the existence of the potentially empowering “final girl” figure, so too do the dictates of industrial pornography – display the women – allow for the existence of more, better, and higher paid roles for female performers. Clover is ambivalent about the feminist potential of the final girl; I am equally ambivalent about the majority of porn heroines. In each of these maligned “low genres,” women’s bodies act as a form of currency, yet in both cases, albeit in different ways, women nonetheless tend to end up on top.

In the so-called “straight” or mainstream porn industry, the paradox of women’s empowerment is located in the fact that women are the primary sex objects, which in turn results in their achieving considerably more economic power than the male performers. Women get top billing – and are paid to match – while male performers are frequently listed below the line, and are paid less. Men rarely achieve the level of “porn star.” There are some notable exceptions, like web darling James Deen, who has achieved crossover success and some amount of mainstream celebrity⁴⁰ (indeed, he was the only male performer to make the 2013 CNBC “Dirty Dozen” list of the porn industry’s popular stars⁴¹), but their relative value to the industry is made clear enough through pay scales: women are typically paid a one-time fee of roughly \$500-1500 per scene, while men average \$300-600 per scene.⁴² Many porn actresses have managed to use their star power to develop a brand, and in addition to better roles and higher pay, opportunities to direct and produce have arisen out of female porn stars’ cultural currency within the US porn industry. Contracted stars can request the opportunity to direct at the studio that owns their

contract, or stars can literally buy into their own image and create a website or production company. So, as women's bodies and the fantasies created thereof continue to be the industry's primary commodity, a number of popular pornographic actresses have managed to brand themselves successfully enough to start creating and directing the fantasies themselves. While producers can earn percentages, directors are most often paid a flat rate. They typically do not command higher pay rates than performers (indeed, their rates are sometimes lower than some stars'), and many women filmmakers in the mainstream industry therefore continue to perform once they have moved behind the camera. The benefits of directing are thus more personal and intellectual, and sometimes political: creative control over one's images and narratives, the joys of artistic and/or self-expression, power over labor conditions, and the potential for revising stereotypical images or redressing representational blind spots.

The vast majority of the women whom I interviewed believe that, on the whole, their gender had given them a distinct advantage in finding opportunities to direct or produce. Once women have branded themselves by becoming stars, it is easier for them to secure distribution if they decide to produce or direct their own videos. In fact, several of them – like Jessica Drake and Belladonna – describe having had the opportunities essentially handed to them without having to seek them out. The experiences these women have had within the industry, and their beliefs about the gender dynamics that they participate in, vary widely, yet again and again I heard women tell me that their gender – far from hindering them – has actually helped them to succeed as directors. Several filmmakers suggested that all the way down the line, from the producers and distributors to the talent, people are more comfortable dealing with a woman. Arryn Lewin, for instance, insisted that,

[It is] easier to sell porn being a girl, in my opinion. Producing and directing, [...] I think the talent feels a lot more comfortable being with all women – there's no guy there holding the camera gawking, and other ones in the background with hard-ons watching it. So I just think they feel a little more comfortable working with women. And then from the business standpoint, it's the same thing as selling. Cause you can still go in to talk and look pretty and flirt, and get a deal. As long as you know what you're talking about too, and you have something good to show them.⁴³

All of the filmmakers who had first worked as performers described (if not in these exact terms) the benefits of branding in opening the path to directing, and many acknowledged the reverse as well: the benefits of directing to further building one's brand. Unlike in Hollywood, in the adult video industry – an industry in which women's names have more selling power than men's – this constitutes a distinct advantage for women. Because women performers' desires (assumed to be enacted in their films once they begin directing) are considered marketable, as Veronica Hart puts it, "it's a lot easier for a woman to get a job directing porn than it is, probably, directing mainstream [Hollywood] stuff."⁴⁴

There are, however, problematic byproducts of this ease of access. In addition to their marketability, Lewin points to another possible reason why women filmmakers continue to proliferate in the mainstream porn industry – the fact that performers may be more comfortable working with women – and this dynamic can be taken advantage of. Director Lizzy Borden, known for making extreme hardcore porn, divulges that she exploits this fact to essentially coerce her performers into doing things they might not be comfortable with: "I'm a female director, and it's easy for me to go 'Oh, come on. Do it,' you know? If a guy asks, they're, like,

‘Oh, he's a pervert.’ But if a woman asks, they do it.”⁴⁵ In line with this, she says that she does not consider herself a feminist:

I'm not for a woman's rights. I am old school, where I think, when I have my baby I'm going to be home taking care of it. I'm just making a life for myself and happy, making good money. I used to be exploited when I did movies. So if someone's going to do it, I might as well.⁴⁶

Here she conveys a rather rudimentary understanding of the idea of women’s rights, and flat-out admits to exploiting other women for the sake of a profit margin. Beyond simply rejecting any sort of womanist or feminist perspective or praxis, she seems to promote misogyny and anti-feminism. Hopefully she is distinctly in the minority in feeling and behaving this way, but it is possible that she is simply the only woman director willing to admit to this so baldly.

She uses the concepts of professional athleticism and authenticity to justify the extreme acts of violence and degradation that she expects her actresses to endure. For this reason, Borden – a former wrestler herself – sometimes hires pro wrestlers like Veronica Caine to perform in her films. On the set of her film *Forced Entry*, Borden told the crew of the PBS show *Frontline* (there to observe production and shoot an episode titled “American Porn”) that she was about to put one of her friends through “Hell.” She elaborates:

I know she can take it. She's a good actress. And I can abuse somebody that I know, but I can't abuse somebody that I don't know. So it's like, I know that I can hit her harder. ... She's not prissy. So she would put a good scene out for me. And at the end I give her a hug, I take her out to dinner, and we go shopping.⁴⁷

The *Frontline* interviewer pushes her further, asking, “Is she going to take a beating? A real beating?” “Yeah,” Borden replies, expressing no noticeable concern for her performer’s welfare

(even if she does intend to “give her a hug” after the scenes wrap). Here there is no suggestion that Borden is asking her performers to enact their own fantasies. Unlike Mason and Taormino, who insist that their performers enjoy degradation and rough sex, Borden does not even gesture toward a concern for her performer’s ability to experience sexual pleasure on her sets. The sole form of authenticity that Borden seems to value is that of the violence, that of a performer who “can take it.”

In *Adult Cinema Review*, Borden and Caine take turns interviewing each other, and both women reject the idea of physical trauma as problematic. Borden asks Caine: “Between the bloody brawls of Xtreme Pro Wrestling to the (fake) bloody scenes of a Lizzy Borden or Tom Zupko movie, have you been traumatized?”⁴⁸ Caine replies, sarcastically, “Oh yeah, I’ve been traumatized! That’s why I keep coming back for more!”, and then insists that she has “always been an Extreme [in reference to Extreme Associates, Borden’s production company at the time] girl at heart because I love this shit! When I leave the XPW ring covered in someone’s real blood or when I leave a movie set covered in fake blood and a quart of cum, I feel so fucking satisfied.” In this way, Caine frames her acceptance of what some might describe as exploitative labor practices as a sort of rejection of mainstream gender norms. Her branding as an “Extreme girl” involves expressing a sense of pride in her ability to give and take a beating, whether in the context of wrestling or pornography. Borden asserts the authenticity of the roughness in her films when she insists that her performers will take a beating, and Caine takes the idea a step further when she claims that her *desire* for rough scenes is equally authentic: “I love this shit!”

“Authenticity” can therefore circulate in the mainstream industry in problematic ways in relation to consent. As Aurora Snow puts it, “a lot of the companies and directors want authenticity. They don’t believe that you make a real grimace on your face,” unless the

performer is actually getting whipped.⁴⁹ “They want everything to be authentic and real,” she says. As with Borden, the insistence on authenticity in this context is limited to the enactment of “real” performative violence that will lead to a “real grimace,” with no concern for whether or not the women performers experience real pleasure during their sex scenes. This notion of authenticity is thus used to justify unsafe working conditions. In an article for the *Daily Beast*, Snow writes that:

Like many other adult actresses, my first few scenes, which were shot in May of 2000, were the stereotypical easy-money kind: some regular vaginal sex where I played the wide-eyed innocent guided by the seasoned male. Fresh meat sells well – the roughing-up came later. Over time the “new girl” scenes no longer appealed to consumers, who want to see diversification from steadily working performers, and scenes that progressively up the ante. Over the last decade this process has gained momentum – girls that enter porn in 2013 have to be ready for extreme acts⁵⁰ earlier on in their careers. Because of this acceleration, there is about to be a generation of porn performers who have spent the majority of their years in porn doing extreme sex acts. I am one of them. [...] Adult actresses are prone to internal tears the way an athlete might be at risk for injuring a tendon. No amount of stretching can prepare you for what will happen on an adult set if things go wrong. No one likes to talk about injuries (porn-girl etiquette), so it’s hard to pinpoint how frequently they occur. Injuries are not routine, as far as I know, but several of us, myself included, have experienced their fair share.⁵¹

Significantly, in describing this industrial shift, Snow compares contemporary porn actresses to professional athletes, recalling Borden’s justification for putting her former pro-wrestler Caine through “Hell,” and suggesting that risk of injury comes with the territory. Porn actresses are

not, however, paid at anything close to the level of professional athletes (at least not to those in the major leagues). Snow also points to the trajectory that women performers are encouraged to follow in their careers, which mirrors the common trajectory of sex scenes (oral to girl-on-girl to boy-girl vaginal penetration to anal) in mainstream porn. Within this trajectory, women are expected to “progressively up the ante” if they hope to remain relevant and in demand. This can lead them into a sort of grey area with regard to consent, in that a woman who consents to participate in a certain kind of sex scene may well not understand the potential risks involved. So even if she consents to participate in a rough double anal scene, a performer typically does not consent to receiving a hypothetical non-routine injury as a result.⁵²

Most filmmakers will acknowledge that exploitation doubtless occurs within the industry, although they typically describe it as happening in a hypothetical “elsewhere.” Snow, however, adds to her critiques of the industry’s unfair and unsafe labor conditions more general concerns about performers’ health and welfare:

There’s no health insurance in porn. If you tell your health insurance company that you do porn, your premiums go way up. Usually you have to kind of lie about it. Then if they find out about that, it’s considered lying on the application, and they don’t have to cover you. [...] I don’t think that scenes pay enough to do that kind of bodily harm. It’s really sad. And I know [a] girl who has had two of her teeth knocked out doing a scene. [...] And she still works for that director and thinks that it’s just part of the job. I think a lot of girls have gotten so used to having maybe unsafe conditions on set, that they just think it’s normal, and that it’s just part of the job and it’s no big deal.⁵³

Yet Snow, like nearly every woman I interviewed, was careful to point out that she herself had never been exploited or taken advantage of, and to insist that she does not replicate these

conditions in the porn that she directs. All of the women I spoke with claim to be concerned about female performers' comfort and safety, if for no other reason than to ensure a good scene. The most common way to enact these concerns is to allow women performers to choose their partners. As Veronica Hart puts it, "in that sense, women have the power. Women can say, I will work with him, I won't work with him, or you know. And it's women first."⁵⁴

Diana DeVoe, however, admits to colluding – though not without reservations – with producers who seek to exploit naïve young women who are new to the industry and thus don't know their worth. She explained to me that she knows of one man ("this pimp, basically") who finds women ("black girls, generally") at places like the Fox Hills Mall, and convinces them to get into porn. She explained that, once they have agreed to that, "they get to the set and he always [...] low-balls them; he'll take like 60% of the money, and one of the people I worked for dealt with him a lot. I wouldn't deal with him, but they were friends. And so they would negotiate the rate for the girl or whatever."⁵⁵ Although she wouldn't "deal with him" for her own productions, DeVoe would sometimes have to work with him when she was directing for other production companies. In those cases, she would make every attempt to inform the performers that they were being offered an exceptionally low rate, but she would not prevent them from accepting it. If they continued to insist on being in the production, she says, "I'm not gonna take that away from you. But that was [...] a real moral dilemma for me, because I don't negotiate rates."⁵⁶

She went on to say that this is simply an egregious example of the sort of thing that happens all the time, even at "the licensed and bonded agencies." The problem is:

You cannot be an agent and a manager at the same time. And an agent gets you work, and gets a cut from the company that they book you for. This is entertainment in general.

A manager manages your career and gets a portion of what you earn. But you can't be both. But all these companies – these licensed, bonded agencies – are taking money from both ends. They take a hundred dollar booking fee from the company, and then they take between fifteen and twenty percent from the girl, and these are the good guys! You know, this guy I'm talking about [the "pimp"] routinely takes fifty percent from the girl.⁵⁷

In this way, performers – and women in particular – are routinely exploited in the mainstream industry. It is precisely this sort of thing that feminist filmmakers like Taormino are attempting to counteract by creating "organic, fair trade" porn for which performers set their own rates. DeVoe insisted that when she produces her own porn, she does not use agencies that exploit performers in that way, but when she works as a director for other producers, she works with whomever they ask her to.

In an attempt to explain why this leads to a moral dilemma (rather than an outright refusal to collude), she told the following anecdote:

This one time, same guy – pimp – he contacted my boss at the time and was like, "Hey, I've got this girl, she really needs to work today. She'll work for..." She was gonna get 200 bucks. It was a \$350 scene; he was taking \$150, she was taking \$200. Now, mind you, the normal price for this is eight hundred to a thousand dollars. [...] The location's three or four hundred bucks. Makeup is \$175, so I paid more for a location, [and] the guy was 500 bucks. So everybody's making more than this girl. So [...] I get there, and I'm like, "Do you know you're getting two hundred dollars for this scene?" She goes, "Yeah, I'm fine." OK. [...] So we did the scene; she did a fantastic scene, was wonderful to work with, everything was great. [...] So we're at the end of it, and I'm writing her this check, and she goes, "I just wanna thank you [...] for making this happen, because it's

my son's birthday and I promised him that I would take him to Disneyland, and now I can." So, yeah. [...] I just started crying. I was like, oh god. I'm gonna go home and hide under my bed for, like, a week. I just do not know how to feel about that. Do you tell her, "Bitch, do not do that, because number one, you're devaluing yourself, and number two you're devaluing everyone else who's in this business"? Or do you let her take her son to Disneyland?⁵⁸

DeVoe's story is worth quoting at length, because it so beautifully crystallizes the constraints inherent to broad swaths of the mainstream industry, and points to the inadequacy of neoliberal models of individual choice and success – a woman with creative control in the porn industry can nonetheless use it to exploit other women. The practice of "pimps" exploiting new performers provides an exception to the rule of female porn performers earning more than men, and is indicative of the problematic gender politics of the industry that bankable stars, including those who go on to direct, are unlikely to encounter, and thus also unlikely to relate to me during interviews.

DeVoe, the only person who spoke openly with me about this phenomenon, does admit to colluding with pimps that exploit performers by convincing them to accept far less than the going rate and by taking absurdly large percentages, but she only does so when working for other producers and insists that she does not do so merely for self-serving purposes. As this story suggests, she is always sure to elicit informed consent, by confirming that the performers know what the going rate is and that they are nonetheless accepting far less, and if the women insist on accepting the low rates offered by their agencies, because they need to take what they can get in the immediate, then she does not feel that it is her place to insist otherwise. She implies that her only recourse, if she didn't want to pay the lower rates, would be to refuse to work with these

girls at all. So should she tell a woman like this one that she's "devaluing [her]self and [...] everyone else who's in this business," or "do you let her take her son to Disneyland?" It is a moral dilemma indeed, and one that is not imposed upon feminist pornographers who work independently. (It is also worth noting that this practice is not found in the production companies that work only with contract stars. It is far more common in amateur and pro-am,⁵⁹ mainstream subgenres that routinely include new or amateur talent.)

Beyond this sort of exploitation, there is a far more widely acknowledged predicament bound up with women's ease of access to directing and producing pornography in the mainstream industry in recent years. The occasional woman, like Roberta Findlay and Doris Wishman,⁶⁰ has been directing or producing pornography ever since the loosening of obscenity laws (among other things) enabled the mainstreaming of pornography back in the early 1970s. Unlike for Findlay and Wishman – who had not worked as performers prior to directing pornography⁶¹ – today, the step of first achieving widespread name recognition as a performer is all but compulsory for women wanting to direct or produce in the mainstream industry. "Who better, *really*, than a porn star to run a porn company? They see it all, do it all, and probably have the keenest sense of anybody as to what turns people on," insists Peter Warren in an *Adult Video News (AVN)* cover article from May 2006, entitled "Boardroom Eyes: From on Top of the Desk to Behind It, Tera Patrick and Other Ms. Triple X-ecutives are Now Calling the Money Shots."⁶² As the lengthy title suggests, Warren's "porn star" refers only to women. What Warren does not specify is that, unlike their male counterparts, women producers and directors generally *have* to work as performers before they become filmmakers. At the same time, even though men perform as well, they rarely achieve the status of "porn star," because ultimately their role is not

to-be-looked-at. Thus women simultaneously experience gender privilege and inequity in trying to achieve creative control in the mainstream porn industry.

Additionally, many women expressed that, despite their ease in finding the opportunity to direct or produce, their control over the images that they create is limited. Distribution companies, most of which are run by men, have a remarkable amount of power in shaping the output of an industry that is comprised not of large, vertically integrated companies (though there are a few of those) but rather of many small producers, running what Constance Penley describes as “mom and pop shops.”⁶³ The distributors, rather than the producers, facilitate industry coherence by dictating, in large part, what will or won’t make it to the shelves of adult video stores or the virtual shelves of large online retail venues. Many filmmakers acknowledge certain restraints that prevent them from doing this or that thing that they otherwise might – Hartley would like to do mainstream films (marketed to straight audiences) with more male anal receptivity, for instance – and when I ask what prevents them from doing these things, they almost always point to the distributors, which underscores the latter’s disproportionate control over the kinds of images that any significant number of people will actually get to see.

Taking this idea even further, Tasha Reign brought to my attention a series of recent mergers. The Manwin corporation now owns a number of major porn production studios, including Brazzers and Digital Playground, and runs the websites for Wicked Pictures as well as most of the major free tube sites, including YouPorn, Pornhub, and Tube8. Johannes Boie describes these tube sites as “among the 100 top-visited sites in the world. They are visited more often than the *New York Times*, for example, and are in the same league as Facebook, Google, and Twitter.”⁶⁴ And then, as Reign puts it, “It gets even sketchier. They go and they buy our

[STI] testing facilities, and they're like, you can't work for us unless you get tested here at this testing facility.”⁶⁵

The implications of this kind of consolidation of power are profound, and while it goes beyond the reach of the average distributor, it points to the ways in which porn content in the adult video industry is standardized and delimited by a handful of powerful individuals and organizations, and biopower is exerted over performers' bodies. As Diana DeVoe told me, even with her own production company, she doesn't “create product for our fans” but rather for the salesman at the distribution company.⁶⁶ Distributors' role as the gatekeepers between a filmmaker and her fans comprises one reason why films that fit *The Feminist Porn Book's* definition of feminist porn are not often made within the mainstream industry. DeVoe goes so far as to say that the distribution companies actually have more to do with what is produced than the consumers do, and that this in turn influences the kinds of gendered and racialized depictions that make their way to consumers.⁶⁷ She explained that, in her experience, filmmakers don't create product for their fans. They create product for the salesman who works at their distribution company. If the distributors won't buy it, the product will never make it to the adult video stores, which tend to buy product from distributors that they know and trust. When it comes to women directors working for small producers, distributors seem only to know and trust those whom they have seen *on* camera. Diana DeVoe experienced this roadblock firsthand.

This reflects another, related reason why feminist porn is not often produced in mainstream contexts: the necessary path from in front of the camera to behind it ensures that most women filmmakers have been directly schooled in the stylistic and narrative conventions and economic imperatives of the porn industry long before they have the opportunity to create their own films. When she was first starting out in 1999, DeVoe experienced difficulty in

finding distribution. Though she had considerable experience as a filmmaker – she had earned an MFA in film production and shot a feature length adult video while living in Hawaii – in LA, she was told: “Women don’t really belong behind the camera. We find that it’s not conducive to the process of adult.”⁶⁸ At first, no one would distribute her work, and she is convinced that this can be attributed to the fact that she is an “educated black woman” who had not (yet) worked as a performer. From her perspective, the industry is sexist as well as racist. Ultimately, she realized:

They’re not gonna let me shoot at this point because I’m a girl [...] So if I’m talent, I’ll give myself three years to make a name for myself, so that I have enough clout to move to that side [...] What I would do is if a company wanted to hire me, they’d pay me my rate, but my other condition was that they would let me shoot a scene for them and I would do it for free. So I shot for three years, uncredited, in order to get where I am today. I’m glad I did it, ‘cause I love what I do, and I’m also glad that the girls coming after me don’t have to do that now.⁶⁹

In contrast, other women I spoke to, like Jessica Drake, Belladonna, and Mika Tan, suggested that their gender, and specifically their careers as porn stars, had in fact made it much easier for them to direct. The industry is changing, but it could also be that the key difference here is that DeVoe came to LA wanting to direct; she had never considered performing. Many of the other women, however, wanted to perform; they had not initially considered directing. By the time they realized they wanted to direct, they experienced the path as wide open for them—each of them, in building up her star persona, had already become a brand. In other words, no one ever told Drake, Belladonna, or Tan that they’d have to perform first, because by the time they decided to try their hand at directing, they had already been performing for some time.

Additionally, certain kinds of women are far more likely to achieve the kind of star status that enables that transition. All pornography, as a for-profit enterprise, is, as Mireille Miller-Young puts it, “regulated and sanctioned by the State, dependent on access to new media technologies, and embedded in the flows of global capital.”⁷⁰ In American society more broadly, certain types of bodies (namely, women’s and trans* bodies) are more likely to be regulated. In the porn industry, certain sex acts (such as fisting) are more likely to be regulated than others, and certain types of bodies and sex acts are deemed more marketable than others; both of these factors influence the kinds of pornography that can find adequate distribution. Since the majority of women filmmakers are also stars, the gender, racial, and sexual identities of a given director are highly relevant in determining one’s access to production and distribution channels.

White, cis-gendered⁷¹ women are overwhelmingly more likely to think that their gender has helped rather than hindered them in their paths to working behind the camera, and this is no doubt due to the systemic inequalities that place a higher value on white women in the industry. Miller-Young, in her contribution to *The Feminist Porn Book*, explains the devaluing of black bodies and perspectives in mainstream pornography:

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. [...] We must take seriously the overwhelming restrictions placed on black women’s sexual agency as performers and producers of porn.⁷²

As Diana DeVoe’s story bears out, it is exceedingly difficult for women to find opportunities to direct or distribute their own porn if they have not first branded themselves as performers, and

with the devaluation of the images and labor of women of color in the industry, they are far less likely to reach that level than their white counterparts.

And even when they do manage to do so, the catch is that distributors expect stars to adhere to their branding. DeVoe, who became known for what she describes as “black on black” and interracial porn, has been frustrated by the industry’s attempts to pigeonhole her. A number of other filmmakers feel a similar form of restriction – Tasha Reign, for instance, feels that she has been typecast as a “girly girl,” and she laments not getting hired to direct or perform in rougher, more extreme scenes. Conversely, Aurora Snow revealed: “I was good at doing some of the extreme rough stuff, and I was good at doing it with a smile on my face, because that’s just how I thought it was done. And so I think that the more I did those things, the more I only got called for those things.”⁷³ Their access to different kinds of roles is nonetheless considerably greater than DeVoe’s. DeVoe questions the racist assumptions of white producers and distributors that have led her to feel that she is being racially niched even from behind the camera. She is exclusively hired to create “ethnic” and interracial porn when she directs for other production companies; and even when she directs for her own production company, she still creates that kind of content, because that’s what the distributor will buy from her. This constitutes a clear double standard, as producers and distributors routinely assume that white men, such as Rick Davis, director of *Bang My Black Ass* (2011) – and, less commonly, white women like Aurora Snow and Kimberly Kane – are perfectly capable of directing black or interracial porn. So rather than wanting to prioritize expanding visibility for performers of color, DeVoe wants distributors and producers to essentially ignore her racial identity in their transactions with her, so that she can work with whichever performers she feels are best for any given part, regardless of their ethnicity.

White women filmmakers in the mainstream tend to avoid or sidestep these issues entirely, although they may acknowledge their existence. Veteran porn star, sex educator, and avowed feminist Nina Hartley argues that, “pornography, for all its other very real shortcomings – very, very real shortcomings – is not this giant sexist morass that the anti’s would have you think. It’s not a fantastic paradisiacal garden either. It’s a workplace. And the workplace is sex, and sex is performance.”⁷⁴ Hartley is careful to point out here that “sex is performance.” Many of the filmmakers I spoke with reiterated this idea in one way or another, emphasizing that pornography is based in fantasy and that, in meaningful ways, the sex we see on screen does not reflect reality. This insistence on pornography as fantasy in many ways forms the basis for various women filmmakers’ perspectives on the industry. Several women believe that these fantasies serve therapeutic or educational purposes, and most believe that it dictates the terms on which porn should be evaluated. The “anti’s” that Hartley refers to – social conservatives, the anti-porn feminists of the 1970s and their descendents today – tend to assume that all pornography is harmful, either because it promotes promiscuity and “deviant” sexual practices or because it constitutes violence against women. But if pornography is a space of fantasy and performance, many pornographers argue, then we should not be too literal in our assessments of it: we should not assume any direct correspondence between pornography and reality, nor should we make assumptions about the kinds of behavior that it promotes. This allows some women to argue that porn merely caters to the (most marketable) fantasies of the DVD-purchasing audience, without necessarily questioning why viewers are assumed universally to be more interested in slender, white women.

In other words, although it is indeed important to avoid policing women’s (and men’s) fantasies, this idea of porn sex as a space of sheer fantasy, for some filmmakers, provides a

justification of stereotypical depictions of gendered, raced, and classed subjects. Tasha Reign, for instance, suggests of the porn she makes as well as prefers to watch, “I want to see a fantasy. I just want to see people that I wouldn’t normally see in real life. Because that’s the point, in my head. It’s like, I want to escape.”⁷⁵ Beyond the notoriously flimsy plot structures that tend to link together the sex scenes in pornographic narratives, the rubric of fantasy covers both the aesthetic conventions of porn actresses (in a hierarchy that tends to favor slender, white, able-bodied, young women) and the highly formulaic conventions of porn sex. Women experience pleasure constantly and ecstatically in mainstream pornography and hungrily receive the ubiquitous facials that end most mainstream porn scenes, but the porn apologist can respond to any critiques of porn texts for failing to depict realistic situations, bodies, or sexual encounters by saying that porn is not supposed to be realistic; it’s supposed to show a fantasy.

At the same time, many porn studios and filmmakers remain heavily invested in the idea of “authenticity,” and even Hartley herself acknowledges that porn occupies a liminal space between fantasy and reality, fiction and documentary:

I appreciate, however stupid porn is, I appreciate its honesty. And its weird kind of honest dishonesty. It is honest; actual bodies, real genitals, and for the men and half the women, real orgasms, but it’s quote unquote “dishonest” in how it happens. “Your shirt is blue; I must have you!” You know.⁷⁶

So, for Hartley, the context might be false or forced or fantastical, but the interactions between the bodies are real. Or, in Veronica Hart’s terms: “The thing about porn is, they’re not pretending to fuck; they’re really fucking.”⁷⁷ The idea that performers in pornography are “really fucking” complicates its status as fantasy entertainment, but we can reconcile this seeming contradiction through the idea of performance. Porn performers’ couplings are always,

necessarily, professional. They may also involve personal (or “real”) pleasure, but there is always a performative aspect to their sexual encounters.

It is the documentary quality of pornography, and its will to authenticity, that allows it to perpetuate misinformation about women’s bodies, desires, and sexualities. Citing a then-forthcoming article by Gertrud Koch, Linda Williams argues in *Hard Core* that, “the genre has consistently maintained certain clinical-documentary qualities at the expense of other forms of realism or artistry that might actually be more arousing.”⁷⁸ The “clinical-documentary qualities” refers to mainstream pornography’s obsessive use of “meat shots” and “money shots” to document penetration and ejaculation. Williams never quite elaborates on what the other, “more arousing” forms of realism might consist of, but it seems clear that among them would be more authentic depictions of female pleasure, as opposed to pornographic images and discourses that elide potential differences between male and female desires and perspectives, or as Williams puts it, citing Luce Irigaray, images that provide “the man with a ‘speculum’ that only confirms the ‘truth’ of his own sexual identity.”⁷⁹

Williams acknowledges that this is a fraught endeavor, as there is always the danger of essentializing a monolithic female perspective, and so what is needed is a “plural conceptualization of power, pleasure, and resistance” without losing “the gender identification that most effectively recognizes our experience of oppression and provides the most dramatic impetus to resist.”⁸⁰ This is the fine line that feminist pornographers attempt to walk, and in so doing, this is the form of authenticity – that is, pluralistic, inclusive visions of desire, including a focus on women’s pleasure – that they seek to depict. In less obvious ways, many of the women creating mainstream pornography likewise claim to be doing so. In both mainstream and

feminist porn, however, those visions in practice sometimes do not, at first glance, appear all that different from the typical male-addressed fare.

The fact is that not all fantasies are convenient or progressive, and the reality of porn sex has important implications for the fantasies it promotes. For Veronica Hart, the way to mitigate the potential problems that charged fantasies can cause is to document consent, much like Tristan Taormino:

A lot of women have that abduction fantasy, right? So how do you portray that abduction fantasy that women have, without sending a message to guys out there that all women want to be raped? You know what I mean? We have rape fantasies, but how can you do it? So I played with that idea a lot, to honor the fact that we do have fantasies like that, but also to try and make it specific to guys, if they watch the whole movie – not if you just selected a part out of my movie – but if you watch the whole movie, you would see that I’m making comments on relationships and stuff like that. So *Edge Play* was about really hard – the harder, tougher sex. But there was always a safe word. [...] They had the choice to partake or not partake. So I always wanted to make clear that it had to be the woman’s choice, even if it was some kind of a rape fantasy or an abduction fantasy or gang bang or whatever, that it all belonged to the woman.⁸¹

Within a film like *Edge Play* (2001), we therefore see the female characters *choosing* to engage in consensual rough sex, and to use a safe word to prevent it from leaving the realm of the consensual. Significantly, she emphasizes the importance of context: “if you watch the whole movie, you would see...” Doubtless many solo porn viewers lack the attention span (or desire) to sit through all 143 minutes of a film like *Edge Play*. Couples – the primary audience to whom the film is marketed – may be somewhat more likely to sit through and watch most or all of the

story along with the sex scenes, but even if one misses out on the overall commentary about relationships that can be gleaned from viewing the film in its entirety, the contextualizing of the sex scenes happens throughout the film, as when the characters choose safe words, etc.

Hart's description of her decision to frame the sex scenes in this way indicates a clear concern with gender politics – specifically, a desire to avoid perpetuating gender-based violence and sexual assault – and yet, unlike Tristan Taormino, when I asked her to label her porn, she replied, “I don’t think I would describe it as feminist.”⁸² Considering, she added: “I think, probably more than a female point of view or a feminist point of view, it’s a Veronica Hart [...] point of view. It’s more what I think and what I’d like to see, more than trying to get behind any kind of movement – all the while, though, being respectful of women.”⁸³ In this way, she insists that the porn that she makes reflects her own desires, and in that sense can be described as confessional or auto-pornographic. Like sexperimental filmmakers, many female pornographers describe their work as reflecting their personalized visions or desires; but because so many of the women directors in the mainstream porn industry are also stars, whose bodies as well as fantasies are therefore considered bankable, they tend to be rewarded rather than dismissed for inserting their sexual subjectivities into their work.

Nearly all pornography is heavily invested in the tension between the twin concepts of fantasy and authenticity, but whereas porn created for and marketed to a primarily male viewership tends to showcase fantasy women with fantasy sex drives and to show authentic male arousal and climax, porn created for and marketed to women and couples tends to involve fantasy scenarios (which may include rape), like Hart’s, that are designed to be authentically arousing for women (or at least for the woman directing them).⁸⁴ Whereas male arousal and climax are verifiable, through the depiction of erect and ejaculating penises, women’s desire

often is not. Queer and feminist pornographers tend to be equally invested in other kinds of authenticity, by eschewing more performative sex acts and positions and by showcasing a much broader range of body types. Queer porn performer Dylan Ryan suggests, in reference to queer feminist porn director Shine Louise Houston, that, “Her dream was to direct sex scenes that were ‘authentic,’ a term that we discussed quite a bit.”⁸⁵ Ryan goes on to say that her own performances in Houston’s films were ultimately “authentic to [her] sexuality.”⁸⁶

The term is also used repeatedly in marketing rhetoric describing the content on Houston’s website, CrashPadSeries.com: “CrashPadSeries is home to authentic queer sexuality. Here you’ll find [...] safer sex, strap-on sex, cocksucking, kink and bdsm, gender play and fluidity, and always-authentic orgasms.”⁸⁷ Notably, the kinds of sex listed include “cocksucking” and “kink”⁸⁸ and “BDSM.” Among the diverse expressions of “authentic queer sexuality,” therefore, are acts associated also with mainstream straight porn. This type of authenticity, however, valuing diversity and all performers’ genuine pleasure, is placed in direct opposition to the majority of mainstream pornography, which values visual proof of male pleasure and women’s performance thereof. Ryan, for that reason, describes mainstream porn as, “empty, inauthentic, and not representative of my sexuality and the kind of sex I was having,” but insists that when she works for Houston, she is able to have precisely the kinds of sex that turn her on.⁸⁹ Of course, mainstream performers also often claim to be authentically turned on during their scenes (although some do admit otherwise), so the assertion of authenticity in this context arguably serves a marketing function as much as any sort of political purpose.

Mainstream women pornographers, not surprisingly, tend to be somewhat less interested in their performers’ authentic pleasure and more interested in creating what we might describe simply as an authentic fantasy; though seemingly a contradiction in terms, this idea motivates a

majority of porn production, especially by women directors. The idea is that, even if her pornography is blatantly depicting fantasy – in terms of the slim, conventionally feminine and attractive, overwhelmingly white, and frequently surgically enhanced female performers who star in the films, as well as the focus on maximum visibility (that is, what supposedly looks good, rather than what feels good) in shooting and positioning sex acts – it is nonetheless a fantasy that is legitimately appealing to the person creating it. This is the rhetorical move that allows some women filmmakers to argue that, although the work they create may seem to pander to stereotypically male desires, since it also reflects their own desires, it is therefore also designed to appeal to women. Many of these filmmakers will cite specific twists on the formula that they employ in order to project their own vision: for instance, Reign with her “girl power” message of women working together in her films, and Drake with her images of strong women seeking their own pleasure in a film like *What Girls Like* (2008).

Indeed, most of the women I’ve spoken to insist that their work is auto-pornographic (though they do not use that term); in addition to, in most cases, starring in their work, the porn they create supposedly constitutes an expression of their own desires or perspectives, or is precisely the kind of porn that turns them on. It is difficult to ascertain where the truth of these statements ends and the marketing imperatives begin; since porn stars’ fantasies are so bankable, they have every reason to claim that they depict and enact them in their work, and their statements to me could thus be read as an extension of their professional performances on-screen. Even if we were to take these statements at face value, in many cases, they reflect an easy choice; the filmmakers’ tastes often align quite happily with those of the mythical “male viewer.” And, as I’ve suggested, their preferences and creative drives have arguably been overdetermined by their experience working first as talent within the industry. Indeed some of

the women I've spoken to admit to this possibility. But even in these cases, I do not think that we should simply dismiss their work or their insights. Do women like Belladonna, for instance, not overtly challenge essentialist notions of femininity and female sexual desire? Equally at home in a tender lesbian love scene as she is shoving a baseball bat up her ass, equally likely to appear with a shaved head as with long, flowing locks, she challenges gender norms and pushes a variety of limits, even though most of her porn (like *Cock Happy* [2006], filled as it is with gagging blowjobs) could easily be described – and promptly dismissed – in Candida Royalle's terms, as attempts to out-nasty the men. As they operate within a male-dominated industry, women filmmakers always create their images from within a patriarchal system. It is therefore tempting to dismiss their work – as anti-porn feminists like Gail Dines and Karen Boyle would – as instances of false consciousness and call it a day. But in meaningful ways, these “women [are] taking control of their own fantasies (even when that fantasy is to hand over control).”⁹⁰

It becomes all too easy to essentialize when one begins to critique a film's depiction of gender and sexuality. Tristan Taormino, in her contribution to *The Feminist Porn Book*, writes that, “I place so much emphasis on the process of making porn because it's difficult to designate what a feminist porn *image* looks like”⁹¹ [emphasis hers]. And in the introduction, the editors argue that, “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.”⁹² I agree with this sentiment, but it begs the question of how one might differentiate (as Mason does, below) between misogynistic degradation and empowering degradation. The implication is that, regardless of its content, porn is feminist if it is created with political motivations to generate alternative images. As Taormino puts it, “What sets feminist film apart from others is that I [*sic*] have a clear agenda behind its

creation.”⁹³ Yet, since a filmmaker’s stated intention for creating violent images may well serve a marketing purpose – as one’s own supposed fantasies – in order to distinguish between problematic and potentially feminist forms of degradation, we must look to the images themselves.

Sinamon Love, who has directed one film and performed in approximately 200, creates porn that, at first glance, seems like precisely the sort that Royalle would critique. Yet she insists that racial imbalances and misrepresentations (more than misogyny) motivate her as a cultural producer:

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.⁹⁴

Love thus claims, like Taormino, to have an overtly political agenda. Nonetheless, the one film that she has directed is *My Black Ass 4* (2004). In the marketing rhetoric of hotmovies.com, the film is described as one in which “Sinamon gets super freaky with two white dudes. Double anal and two big loads on her smiling face!”⁹⁵ The alternative images that Love seeks to create are not what one might expect. In her essay in *The Feminist Porn Book*, she explains that, “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.”⁹⁶ Rather than wanting to create the popular notion of “porn for women” – softer, more focused on romance and female pleasure and empowerment (which typically precludes extreme female submissiveness or

subjugation) – Love seeks to create “more intense hardcore, blowbangs, rough sex, and/or fetish content featuring all black actors.”⁹⁷

Regarding the question of whether or not she considers her work (and herself) to be feminist, ultimately she claims the identity, but insists upon the importance of intersectionality:

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 [*sic*] 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.⁹⁸

For Love, her racial identity cannot – and should not – be separated out from her gender identity, and her artistic choices and labor practices reflect a concern with creating more varied images of black female sexuality. Due perhaps to the constraints inherent in working within the mainstream industry, *My Black Ass 4* does not do exactly what she seeks to accomplish, primarily in that it does not feature all black actors. But in this case, as in many others, we must interrogate and look beyond the surface.

In a similar example, the description of Aurora Snow’s interracial film *Teenage Chocoholics* (2005) on adulthoodempire.com, for instance, reads: “Me and my slutty little teen girlfriends agree, there is nothing as sweet as a huge black cock, especially when it’s jammed deep up our tight pink buttocks!”⁹⁹ The film itself, despite some potentially offensive dialogue, is however entirely conventional. Snow herself claims that what could be perceived as racism or stereotyping (including lines such as, “Is it true what they say about black guys?”) was in fact “tongue-in-cheek.” She told me,

I was making fun of the black guy on white girl stuff that I had seen so much of. And so I think it’s a little bit cheesy. And the guys that I hired were actually having a lot of fun

with the dialogue. Some of the dialogue that I had written, they actually changed it and ended up ad-libbing. [...] But I think they were having a lot of fun with what I was doing and the humor that I was trying to display, with the black guy/white girl porn. And also, though, capitalizing on it – of course.¹⁰⁰

In other words, the film attempts to have it both ways. According to Snow, the black male performers in fact created much of the dialogue that comes off as racist, and both they and Snow wanted to call attention to the stereotypes and clichés of the subgenre of interracial porn while at the same time “capitalizing on” them.

The film begins with the women declaring themselves “so ivy league” and as such, insisting that they “don’t associate” with the likes of the men. The film thus immediately calls attention, in an admittedly silly and superficial way, to the issue of racial discrimination. This is followed by a scene in which the men discuss what has just happened – one of them (played by Jevlin St. Jox) is deeply offended, while the other (played by Devlin Weed) admits that he nonetheless would want to “fuck those bitches.” The latter then drifts off to sleep, and in a dream sequence, we see one of the women (played by Veronica Jett) deem him “so fuckable” because of his “educated look.” With a cut to a medium shot of the Devlin Weed’s character, we see him look down at his own body in surprise, to find himself wearing a pink polo shirt, which is clearly intended to be a symbol of a specific racial identity and social class: the white, moneyed elite. This racial drag arguably functions like gendered drag, opening up a space for the consideration of the social construction of race and ethnicity. Rather than merely replicating stereotypes, the film also parodies them. During the sex scene itself, the performers refrain from making racially charged remarks; instead we hear only moans and the occasional conventional dirty talk (e.g. “Do you like that?”).

The film's willingness to take advantage of the racial stereotypes that the niche market for interracial porn (much of which, interestingly, is located in the Southern states, according to Snow and several other interview subjects) supposedly desires is evident in the requisite focus at various moments on the supposedly unusually large size of the black men's penises (which always seems absurd in the context of an industry in which every male performer has an unusually large penis) and prodigious use among the men of the n-word. The willingness to poke fun at these same stereotypes is also clear, as in one scene, when Devlin Weed's character explains to St. Jox's that, in order to get the "white bitches," they need to "dress like white boys," which apparently involves wearing the pink shirt from the dream sequence. This is clearly designed to elicit laughter, and the tongue-in-cheek nature of the film's engagement with race in the story moments of the film seems clear from the tone with which the dialogue is delivered. This is perhaps, in a broader sense, what a great many feminist filmmakers working with challenging images (e.g. of female submission or degradation, or of hypersexual black women) do; although they ultimately cannot control how their images will be received by any given viewer, they hedge their bets by both exploiting and challenging gender/racial/sexual norms, stereotypes, and fetishized images and identities.

To a certain extent, the tension between the exploitation and the critique can be located in the common split between a film's marketing and diegesis. The language used to describe porn videos on websites and DVD covers, for instance, is often blatantly misogynist, racist, and/or homophobic, even when the videos themselves are unremarkable and unoffensive, as is the case with the split between the rhetoric used to describe *Teenage Chocoholics* on adultdvdempire.com (quoted above), and the treatment of race in the film itself. This is also true of the language used within the videos (i.e. in dialogue or pre-scene interviews) versus the actions performed on

screen. Snow seems to confirm this when she refers to racism in the industry as “a marketing strategy.” This is particularly prominent in pornography that depicts interracial couplings, but it occurs to some degree in most mainstream porn.

For instance, in the “gonzo” (a subgenre of low-budget pornography, which typically breaks the fourth wall via the cameraperson’s participation in the action) video *My First Black Cock* (2005), a white cameraman interviews a series of white women, each before her scene with a black man. Each of these women makes an issue of the fact that her partner will be black, and usually emphasizes that he will be “her first black cock” (although at least one woman converses at length before her sex scene about how much she loves “fucking black guys,” thereby undermining the authenticity of the movie’s title).¹⁰¹ During the sexual numbers,¹⁰² the women inevitably make a point of articulating and rearticulating the fact of their partners’ “big black cocks” and their own “tight white pussies.” When the men speak at all, they do likewise. Meanwhile, the actual content of the scenes – i.e. the sex – looks exactly like that of any other porno movie, aside from the differences in the performers’ skin color. This disconnect between the potentially offensive rhetoric and the highly conventional content is symptomatic of adult video’s endless pursuit of the new and the nasty, which inevitably leads to redundancy. In case it is no longer considered taboo (at least, in liberal circles) for a black man to sleep with a white woman, the movie attempts to shore up its transgressiveness via repetitive and self-explanatory dialogue. As with most other mainstream porn, if they can’t do something original or at least something dirtier than what’s come before, they’ll try to make it sound fresh and dirty.

Jacky St. James has a similar explanation for the industry’s perpetuation of racial stereotypes: “People say porn’s a racist business, but it’s just a nichey [*sic*] business.”¹⁰³ These two ideas are not, however, mutually exclusive. It may well be true that interracial porn (a

designation that, significantly, only refers to black-on-white sex, thereby collapsing and eliding other forms of racial difference even as it exaggerates and fetishizes the differences between black and white performers) is a self-conscious marketing strategy designed to target a specific niche market, and thus derives less from the racism of individual producers and distributors than it does from a concern with the bottom line. Porn markets do not operate in an ideological vacuum, however. The valuing of white bodies over bodies of color and the perceived marketability of stereotypes reflect larger, more diffuse and systemic racial imbalances in American society. Regardless of the producers' and distributors' intentions in creating these kinds of images, they nonetheless perpetuate inequities and harmful stereotypes.

Aurora Snow argues that much of the blame for this should fall not on distributors or producers, but rather on the performers' agents:

I think that there are some very old agents in the business, and some very old company owners, and they've owned these porn companies since the 80s, and they've been around doing this for so long. And back then, there was a much larger racial taboo than there is now, and so they got very used to advising girls, "Don't work with black guys. If you're gonna do it, do it in the end of your career." And that was also a strategy for stretching out a girl's career, and it's a really, really old way of thinking, because there's no stretching out a career. Because of the Internet and the way everything is, and there's so few companies compared to what there was [*sic*] ten years ago, girls don't really have a career stretch. They kind of have to just come in and do everything all at once, and so their career life span is a lot shorter. And if an agent suggests that they don't do black guys right away, then they're probably missing out on a lot of money, and they're probably not going to be recouping that money later either. [...] But then the other thing

too is that some agents believe that, for a girl to do interracial – which is just a black guy – [...] she should get paid more. You know, there's a premium for that. And so there's different ways of thinking, and I think it goes back to who controls the girls. Whoever controls the girls is the one that's advising them, saying this is what you should do, this is what you shouldn't do, and that's who they're listening to.¹⁰⁴

Racism in the porn industry is systemic and entrenched, and I do not think that it can be reduced to the persuasive power of agents. Snow's point is worth considering, however, in that agents certainly have the power to reinforce and perpetuate the ideologies that contribute to the institutionalized racism. As Mireille Miller-Young demonstrates, the porn industry has a long history of devaluing of black bodies and black labor,¹⁰⁵ and the marketing strategies of interracial porn and the labor strategies of white women's agents contribute to this cycle of devaluation. Individual performers, although it is their bodies onto which these racist and misogynist discourses are imposed and inscribed, have very little power over the images that they participate in creating.

Like Sinnamon Love, Mika Tan, an Asian/American porn performer, was inspired to direct her own porn out of a desire to depict underrepresented racial/sexual identities. In her case, however, she wanted to rectify the exclusion of Asian men from mainstream porn. Asian men hardly ever appear in straight porn, and in gay porn they nearly always play bottoms or twinkies.¹⁰⁶ So Tan hoped to make porn in which Asian men dominate their scenes. As of 2014, however, Tan has not managed to distribute the scenes that she has shot. It is precisely this that makes women – and especially queer women and women of color – filmmakers' control over their own images so radical and significant, even when the images may at first seem typical or

reactionary, and even when the women themselves deny a political agenda and refuse to identify as feminist.

Of those filmmakers who disavow feminism, several do it because they see it as advocating for women at the expense of men. For instance, Nica Noelle told me, “I don’t identify with one gender over the other.”¹⁰⁷ It’s no secret that feminism has a PR problem; many women reject the label because it has obtained negative associations over the years. Noelle described most feminists as “sourpusses.”¹⁰⁸ And yet she also says that her porn is motivated by her desire to see women actually enjoying themselves. She says that she had always hated boy/girl porn and wanted to create Sweet Sinner films, one of her production companies, in order to see if it would be possible to make boy/girl that wasn’t “disgusting.” This strikes me as similar to Tristan Taormino’s overtly feminist motivations for creating the *Rough Sex* series – Taormino argues that it is the one type of porn that anti-porn feminists can point to as examples of how all porn is degrading to women. So she wanted to challenge herself to see if she could find a way to make porn in which a woman gets slapped or shoved down to her knees for instance, but have it not be degrading, indeed to have it be feminist. She accomplishes this through contextualizing the scenes. In set-ups or interviews, for instance, we hear women explaining that they are about to enact their own personal fantasies. So, as Taormino puts it, “the consent is immensely clear. It is literally spoken, before the scene even begins.”¹⁰⁹

As opposed to Taormino’s objectives in creating the *Rough Sex* series, Mason – somewhat infamous for making exceptionally rough and nasty porn – is entirely disinterested in documenting consent. Like Roberta Findlay so many years before her, Mason enjoys depicting women being beaten and degraded, but also (though this is less often remarked upon) tends to feature women perpetrating violence as well as experiencing it. For instance, her film *Riot Sluts*

(2004) opens with a female performer, Katrina Kraven, publicly urinating while standing up (“guy style!”, as one reviewer exuberantly describes it¹¹⁰). By opening with this in-your-face bit of drag performed by an otherwise conventionally feminine-looking performer, Mason calls direct attention to the performativity of gender, and alerts us that, in the scene that follows, she will be depicting women behaving in defiance of gender norms. Kraven and another female performer (Gia Paloma), each with a lead pipe in hand, then proceed to destroy a car, smashing the windows and spraying the words “Riot Sluts” across the doors. These words, here and in the film’s title, function to affirm a sensibility associated with riot grrrl (a movement that I discuss in more detail in relation to alt-porn in Chapter 4), which combines the seemingly opposed concepts of toughness and girliness. In Mason’s formulation, the toughness is combined more specifically with sluttiness, a concept that aligns – as we shall see – with her rather complicated feminist politics. The performers go on to have the kind of aggressive sex that is typical of boy-girl scenes in mainstream pornography, but with the power dynamics switching back and forth between the women, such that they take turns gagging on the dildo that they have just used to “punish both pussies.”¹¹¹ Scenes like this, in which women behave as sexual aggressors or perpetrate violence (in this case, on a car), challenge normative gender roles in meaningful ways, but there is a limit to their transgressiveness.

Mason’s aggressive women – in line with other filmmakers’, such as Aurora Snow’s – are almost exclusively aggressive and/or violent only with other female performers. It is far more rare to see a female performer dominate a scene with and humiliate or degrade a man. As Snow puts it, “in my movies, when I would have all-girl scenes, I loved to give the women a lot of power. I didn’t do this with boy-girl scenes so much though, but I would always do it with girl-girl scenes.”¹¹² When I asked her to elaborate on why she didn’t give the women power in

the boy-girl scenes, she replied that porn attracts a certain kind of male personality, and “there are very few women that remain very dominant within the scene with a dominant male. And so that’s way easier, to have a dominant female with another female.”¹¹³

This suggests that there is not necessarily an imperative to maintain the female performers’ femininity in mainstream porn. The greater taboo seems to be the depiction of male performers in the non-traditionally-masculine submissive role. This reflects the overarching valuation of masculinity over femininity in American society more broadly – through Julia Serano’s notion of traditional sexism – and the related tendency to accept female masculinity as less transgressive than male femininity. Unlike Tasha Reign, Mason is not interested in adopting a girly persona for herself or as a description of her work – one journalist specifically describes her work as not “that sexy girly stuff.”¹¹⁴ In other words, although submission is gendered feminine in both mainstream pornography and American culture at large, Mason believes that female submissiveness in her films cannot be equated to girliness.

When it comes to her own persona, Mason, along with several other filmmakers, has in fact expressed the desire to disavow her gender entirely, insisting that she’s not making porn for women, and that she wants to be seen as “a director, period,” rather than a female director. “I never approach any scene from a female perspective,” she claims.¹¹⁵ Yet this doesn’t prevent her from writing, in her contribution to Carly Milne’s anthology, *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, about how her porn has enabled her to “develop a more complex image of womanhood,” one that “contradicts societal prescriptions of femininity.”¹¹⁶ While Taormino and Hart believe that the contextualization of particularly rough sex is crucial to an ethical, feminist praxis, Mason finds what she calls the “requirement to explicitly demonstrate that a woman is sexually powerful” infantilizing, patronizing, and paternalistic.¹¹⁷ She thus believes

that she “sold out” when producer Patrick Collins convinced her to include some footage that shows her making sure an actress is OK in the middle of a particularly intense scene in *Lady Fellatio 2*. If sexual assault and other forms of violence against women were not so woefully common in American society, Mason’s argument about the need to document consent as infantilizing would hold more weight.

Porn’s involvement of “actual bodies” and “real genitals” raises important issues about the nature of desire and consent: the camera can document or “prove” that two performers are engaging in sexual intercourse, but it cannot prove that both performers fully consented to do so, without coercion. It recently came to light, for instance, that a woman in an abusive relationship had been coerced into filming porn that was posted not “on some angry, misogynist revenge porn site” but rather MakeLoveNotPorn.tv – “a curated ‘real world sex’ site that prides itself on featuring videos of enthusiastic, consensual sex shared willingly by its participants.”¹¹⁸ As Lux Alptraum, webmistress of adult website Fleshbot.com, puts it, “asking all of the parties to confirm their consent is not a guarantee of the absence of any abuse. But it is difficult to see what further measures can realistically be taken.”¹¹⁹ So even porn that claims to be, in essence, organic and fair trade can involve abuse and coercion, though I would agree with Alptraum that it is difficult to imagine what could be done to avoid this.

Again, we must take care not to conflate representation and production contexts. At issue in the recent MakeLoveNotPorn.tv abuse scandal is the treatment of real women behind the scenes, whereas the represented sex does not look demonstrably different from consensual sex. As Alptraum puts it,

While some might think abusive sex is something that can be easily screened for (like the MakeLoveNotPorn.tv subscriber who condemned the abuser’s video for its spitting and

hitting), it's important to remember that consensual sex can look violent and abusive, and abusive sex can look loving and tender: unless you're a part of the situation yourself, there's no way of truly knowing whether it was completely consensual or uncomfortably coercive.¹²⁰

Leaving aside egregious violations of women's bodies and liberties, consent in the context of porn production sometimes exists within a grey area; performers sign contracts and undergo STI testing, but because ultimately no one other than the performer can know if she is uncomfortable with the acts that she is performing, it is indeed difficult to imagine what additional measures can be taken to prevent less visible forms of abuse of actual women on porn sets.

The issue of consent nonetheless complicates women filmmakers' representations of women's fantasies in mainstream porn. While the real and the represented should not be confused with one another, this potential for the abuse of actual women is precisely what necessitates the documentation of consent in rough sex scenes in pornography. Documenting a woman's consent, on-screen, to participate in a scene cannot possibly guarantee that the performer is not in some way being coerced, and there is of course no way to verify whether she does indeed fantasize about being submissive, sexually humiliated, roughed up, etc. Financial motivations – as in the example Diana DeVoe gives, of the performer who wanted to take her child to Disneyland – arguably constitute a subtle and largely inescapable form of coercion. One could argue that the on-screen documentation of consent thus serves a conciliatory purpose, allowing viewers to feel good about what they're watching without actually ensuring the safety of the performers, but what the documentation of consent does achieve is to suggest to the viewer that communication and negotiation are necessary antecedents to consensual BDSM, and thus perhaps it can help to prevent real-world abuse through more or less subtle education.

It is this that Mason resists as supposedly patronizing to women. Her self-representation involves positioning her work as demanding, hard, and no-nonsense. At the same time, she is “known for getting girls to open up in pre-scene interviews,” which, regardless of their intent, can function to contextualize the sex scenes in her films.¹²¹ The primary differences between that and the avowedly feminist contextualization of the sex in Taormino’s *Rough Sex* series are that Mason doesn’t insist on the female performers emphasizing in their interviews that the scenes to follow will enact their own fantasies, and Mason doesn’t mark (or market) her work as feminist. When it comes to the politics of porn representation, she actually performs some complex ideological gymnastics in order to argue in one breath that reproducing conventionally gendered power dynamics is not reactionary or misogynist, and in the next to proclaim her dedication to advocating for “an image of womanhood that contradicts societal prescriptions of femininity.”¹²² What allows her to reconcile these seemingly antithetical concepts is her belief that choosing to be “degraded” can be an empowering and radical act. In other words, though they might encourage female submissiveness in a general sense, conventional notions of femininity do not allow for a woman to actively *choose* the role of slave or bottom, to take sexual pleasure in her own degradation.

She asserts that in a culturally repressive, slut-shaming society, it is a radical act to own or claim the identity of a “dirty whore”; hence her celebration of “riot sluts” in the film by the same name. Beyond that, as a woman making extreme porn, Mason herself challenges gender norms, even if the content of her films itself does not. While others critique the industry for failing to depict women’s authentic sexuality (usually presumed to be somewhat softer, more story-driven, more romantic, or at least to foreground women’s pleasure and desire), Mason levies an entirely different criticism – she talks about how she has been censored and criticized

for making genuinely nasty porn. At Hustler, for instance, a female head of production (Kat Slater) signed her on as a director and gave her free rein to enact her creative vision. After some corporate reorganizing, however, Mason was approached by two male producers, or as she puts it, “two men in suits I'd never met before, and who'd never seen any of my movies, took turns lecturing me about why the videos I produce are morally wrong and degrading to women.”¹²³

This is similar to the above-mentioned scenario in which Mason felt she “sold out” by ultimately acceding to producer Patrick Collins’s request that she preserve the scene in *Lady Fellatio 2* in which Mason intervenes and the female performer’s consent to continue is made explicit. Mason’s contention may merely constitute a form self-promotion, allowing her to imply that her more recent porn is even rougher than *Lady Fellatio 2*. (If so, it appears to be a successful one, since her films routinely outsell most other porn filmmakers’ work; her films were included in the top ten on *AVN*’s monthly lists of best-selling DVDs ten times in 2013, and in both February and May of that year, two of her titles were among the top ten.) From a practical perspective, in an increasingly couples-oriented industry that routinely faces obscenity charges from local and state governing bodies, the producers’ point may be well taken. Nonetheless, this policing of women’s desires by men is of a sort that is not at all what is typically imagined or discussed in popular or even academic discourse about the porn industry. In line with Jacky St. James’s arguments about how the distributors won’t allow her to include content in which women are abused, this may seem like regulation designed to protect women, but in fact it arguably constitutes a new kind of paternalism. It is one thing to protect performers’ safety; it is another thing entirely to imply that a woman directing porn cannot depict fantasy scenarios in which female characters are submissive, subjugated, or degraded. Regulation designed to protect performers from actual abuse or coercion on set serves an important purpose,

but de facto regulation like this – implemented by producers and distributors out of fear of obscenity prosecution – merely limits the ways that female performers *appear* to be treated on screen.

Mason's porn – in which women are typically spat on, slapped, and choked, among other things – may well be offensive to many women, but that does not detract from the importance of her critique of the policing of women's fantasies in porn production. Her anecdotes about male producers censoring her vision when she worked for Hustler in fact reminds me of the producers and distributors who, by claiming to have superior knowledge of what women (as a market) would or would not watch, refused to take Candida Royalle seriously when she approached them with her own vision in the early '80s. At that time, Royalle initially had to self-distribute her porn, because she couldn't find an extant distributor to represent her. As a result, she founded Femme Productions, Inc., which continues to produce and distribute adult video directed by women.¹²⁴

It is undeniably problematic that male executives were dismissive of Royalle because of her gender in the early to mid-'80s, but it is arguably also problematic if male producers today are empowered to deem a woman's fantasy too offensive to women, as if "women" is a coherent and stable identity category that they understand better than she does. This is not an isolated phenomenon: porn actress Marie Luv insists that she has repeatedly experienced shaming for her rape fantasies by male producers and directors. Ultimately, the outcomes of these women filmmakers' struggles with male producers differ in important ways. Royalle had to self-distribute and ultimately self-produce in order to continue making the type of porn that interests her, whereas Mason merely had to retain a scene that she did not like in the final cut of one of her films, and has continued to work for a variety of mainstream production companies. Yet, in

both cases, albeit in roughly opposite ways, the anecdotes of clashes with male producers allow these women filmmakers to reinforce their respective professional personas: Royale, as the feminist pornographer resisting the masculinist traditions of the mainstream industry, and Mason, as the hardcore pornographer whose work is too nasty even for the boys.

At stake here is the idea of the “authentic” female vision, and who is empowered to determine or define it. Although in other contexts she admits to liking “a bit of rawness,” Royale claims in *The Feminist Porn Book* that the work of many women pornographers is, in effect, too masculine in its address and thus does not reflect an authentic female perspective.¹²⁵ Mason, Tasha Reign, Jacky St. James, and others, however, insist that their personal visions as women are rougher and more hardcore than the imagined “authentic female vision” advocated by Royale and male executives alike. In this way, they challenge the very notion of gender normativity, of associations between softness and femininity, roughness and masculinity. Despite the fact that her porn is in some ways conventional, for instance, the particular combination of “girliness” and roughness in Reign’s public persona functions to unsettle binary gender conceptions.

The contested status of “authenticity” is perhaps most starkly realized in conversations about “porn for women,” as opposed to “porn by women.” Borden does not claim to make the former, but Royale and others argue that porn made by women should also be made for women, and thus be less rough than mainstream porn, eschew facials, and have more of a focus on romance and tenderness. But, as mentioned above, filmmakers like Tasha Reign, Jacky St. James, and Mason, to name only a few, insist that the porn that they make is, if anything, not rough enough to reflect their true desires, even as male producers and distributors – and women filmmakers like Lizzy Borden – exploit the idea of authenticity to justify violent images and

unsafe labor practices. When defending their desire to depict rough or violent sex that involves the degradation of women, women filmmakers often suggest that “porn for women” is a more expansive category than others (like Royalle) will allow.

Often substituting their own subject position for the marketing category of “women consumers,” women filmmakers often insist that they are making porn for women, in the sense that they – as women – create the kinds of images that they want to see. Mason, for instance, defends the authenticity of her preference for rough sex in explicitly gendered terms:

Mason’s Dirty Trixx was conceived from my deeply held belief that most porn productions ignore girls who get off on rough sex. I have a problem with directors who only want to depict women being degraded because of their misogyny. Other productions depict girls getting degraded for the sake of getting degraded – it’s all about shock value. I also wanted *Dirty Trixxx* to dispel the myth that women always have to be treated like “ladies.” [...] There are women like myself who enjoy intense, psychological, and physical aggression, and nobody wants to address this.¹²⁶

Here, Mason establishes a dichotomy between misogynist depictions of female degradation or degradation for the sake of shock value, and her own “authentic” version of female degradation that reflects her personal desires. An example of this type of degradation in the film is when a male doctor (of sorts) comes to examine his subject, Brandi (played by Olivia Saint), who is found on her hands and knees in a cage, wearing nothing but a muzzle, black leather top, and black crotchless panties. The doctor concludes that she is “in heat,” and his “treatment” involves encouraging her to perform fellatio on him through the bars of the cage. In a medium and a genre that overwhelmingly depict women as ultimately submissive and women’s desires as ultimately subservient to men’s, a scene like this seems merely to reproduce the normative ideal

of female submission and furthermore, by showing a man who gets to “diagnose” and thus dictate a woman’s sexuality, replicates and eroticizes institutional and systemic patriarchal control over women’s bodies. This is a potentially disturbing move, in a country in which women’s reproductive rights are still heavily regulated by the state, but one could also interpret the scene as a critical commentary on that very idea. The eroticization of this sort of power dynamic could be read as an empowering reframing of it, in which the woman is able to choose whether or not to participate and can generate her own pleasure from it. If Mason is true to her word and only hires women who genuinely enjoy being submissive and degraded, then it is entirely possible that the scene’s power dynamics are far more complicated than they first appear. To return to the earlier question, the difficulty arises in locating the difference between misogynist and empowered degradation: does it lie in the text, in the filmmaker’s and/or the viewer’s interpretations of it, or in the performers’ or the filmmakers’ “authentic” desires?

On the level of representation, the porn that she makes may seem difficult to defend or anyway to describe as feminist; but if we locate it on the level of production, she makes an important intervention by speaking from the margins to insist on the validity of her vision, and it is on that level that we may see the difference between “women being degraded because of [male directors’] misogyny” and female degradation in films made by “women like [Mason] who enjoy intense, psychological, and physical aggression.” Authenticity is a jealously guarded commodity among feminist (and queer) pornographers, but Mason claims the term for her work:

“Ultimately, I’d like to be known for my desire to capture authentic exchanges between performers.”¹²⁷ According to *Adult Video News*, she is well on her way to achieving that desire; industry commentator Buzz Killington points out that many female performers list Mason as their favorite director and claim that “they do their best scenes” for her.¹²⁸

Although, like Borden, she doesn't identify her work as feminist or have a clear political agenda, unlike Borden, Mason does (though without putting it in these terms) insist upon ethical or even feminist production practices: she claims only to work with women who, like her, find "degrading" sex to be a legitimate turn-on, even as she refuses to contextualize the scenes by providing us with that information, and she will stop a scene if she senses that an actress is experiencing any sort of unwanted emotional or physical discomfort. Performer/director Sinnamon Love, who identifies as a submissive and has appeared in Mason's films, confirms this, adding that Mason always ensures that performers are comfortable with the sex acts, scenarios, and scenes that she shoots.¹²⁹ Unlike many of those created by any given male director, her scenes apparently do – according to Love, as well as Mason's own self-representation – showcase female performers who are genuinely aroused by degradation and subjugation.

To the best of anyone's knowledge, however, Mason herself has never performed in pornography. In many of her interviews, she tells an anecdote about how she first got into directing. She was introduced to Patrick Collins, the head of production at Elegant Angel in the early 2000s. In a meeting, he asked her if she would consider performing.¹³⁰ When she told him she just wanted to direct and not to perform, she was surprised to find that his next question was, "How many lines [of films] do you think you can handle?"¹³¹ But reflecting upon the encounter, she writes that in the moment that he asked her to perform, she felt devastated, because she thought she was being treated like a "fucking object" and a "fucking piece of meat."¹³² On the one hand, she wants to resist institutionalized sexism and gendered expectations, and she is a rare success story in this regard; it is not insignificant that she managed to break into directing without first having to appear on camera, in an industry in which female directors are

overwhelmingly performers as well. Her incredible success as a prolific and lucrative director gives the lie to industry players' most common justification for the imperative requiring aspiring female directors to have prior experience as performers; namely, that women can't know how to direct a good scene if they have not first performed in one.¹³³ But it also begs the question: if she believes that to be an actress is to be objectified in a way that she cannot abide, how can she reconcile that with objectifying actresses herself in her films?

As an extension of this ambivalent politics, in her rare public appearances at industry events like award shows and expositions, Mason would occasionally don a burqa. She claims, seemingly in reference to the policing of her non-normative desires, to have worn it in order to symbolize the "caging" of women's sexuality.¹³⁴ In one such appearance, at the AVN Expo in 2009, she further complicated the garment's symbolism by appearing with "Julie Night in tow, wearing a dog collar."¹³⁵ The critique of gendered expectations in porn, and certainly in American society at large, may be justified, but her means of expressing this idea of male repression of female expression is nonetheless a problematic appropriation of a complex cultural and religious symbol. Scholars and activists have critiqued the discomfort that the burqa provokes in Western observers. Ellen McLarney suggests that, "Just before and just after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the burqa seemed to resist the penetration of Western discourses, blocking off access to the highly charged realm of women's bodies."¹³⁶

In the gendered neoliberal rhetoric of emancipation used in American media coverage to justify American aggression in Afghanistan in the years following 9/11, the burqa came to metonymically represent the plight of the women who we were supposedly fighting to "liberate." These exoticized images of veiled and apparently subjugated Afghani women also served to reassure Americans, by way of comparison, that women on the domestic front had already

achieved liberation – thus rendering feminism redundant. Mason appropriates this symbol as irresponsibly as American media has exploited it. Naïve or offensive as it may be, though, her displacement of the burqa onto a white, American, non-Muslim woman's body in a Western context, in some sense reflects the Western gaze back onto itself, by provoking discomfort and reminding us of the ongoing gender inequity here at home. She seeks to resist sexual surveillance, to deny full access to the “highly charged realm” of her female body; thereby displacing onto the text of her body her protest against systemic patriarchal control over her film texts. She resists the idea that *all* women – specifically, she herself – exist to-be-looked-at, even as her work (and her accompaniment by a female slave at the AVN Expo) objectifies other women. The idea of a pornographer resisting access to her own body, even with a collared slave in tow, is not necessarily hypocritical if we accept that it is OK for some women – or better yet, people – to be sexualized as long as it is also OK for some women (or people) not to be. This is a significant intervention in an industry in which women filmmakers overwhelmingly occupy the role of performers as well. Mason's otherwise problematic appropriation of the burqa without any acknowledgment of its religious meanings, arguably functions to insist upon a broadening of women's roles in the porn industry: women in porn, she insists through these veiled public appearances, can be subjects without also being objects.

At the same time, this resistance to her own objectification is very much in line with her aspiration to be discussed only as “a director, period” rather than a female director. She does not want to be reduced to the sum of her body parts. Ironically, some commentators have, in a sense, taken her at her word – denying her femininity by suggesting that her persona is merely a male construct, and that producer Patrick Collins is the true creative force behind her films.¹³⁷ This is symptomatic of some of the more problematic gender politics of the industry, in which women's

creative work is frequently dismissed as such. On several occasions, male industry insiders have confided in me only to write off certain women filmmakers, including Belladonna, as mere fronts for male directors. My conversations with male (and some female) filmmakers, crew members, and industry commentators have revealed a widespread assumption that reduces female authorship in the mainstream porn industry to a marketing ploy.¹³⁸ Mason admits to being insulted by these kinds of accusations, even as she neglects to acknowledge the importance of claiming the identity of a female (let alone feminist) filmmaker.

Mason can in some ways be taken as a limit case for “choice feminism” in the context of porn production. If her choice is often to shoot seemingly the most misogynist, decontextualized, and easily reviled types of images, can her work in any way be regarded as feminist? Her contradictory claims about women and femininity combine to suggest that it she is most concerned with defending her individual right to express her own sexuality, although she avoids doing so through her own body. But, unlike Tasha Reign, she patently refuses to identify with the conventionally feminine “girly” culture, and the choices she is making are in some senses not the easy ones, in that they have occasionally provoked censure and placed her at the center of controversies both within and outside of the industry (although, by amplifying her notoriety, the latter could as easily have served a promotional as a repressive function).

Her porn frequently upholds the most common and overused gendered power dynamics in the porn industry. But, while the fact remains that the porn industry is not – nor has it ever been – opposed to showing women enjoying dirty sex and being “degraded,” her attempts to critique American society’s overall tendency toward sexual repression and slut-shaming are worth exploring. Even if ultimately too confused and confusing to be effective, her public critiques nonetheless expand the dialogue about the roles available to women in mainstream

porn. The differences in production contexts and labor conditions between her porn and much other mainstream porn production (in which women's desires and comfort may be irrelevant) similarly cannot be ignored. Like the infamous work of Lizzy Borden, Mason's films are not the run-of-the-mill, easily digestible, male-driven or even neo-feminist¹³⁹ porno. Their work can be deeply challenging, and it's difficult to imagine someone in whom a film like *Forced Entry* – one of Borden's films, in which women characters are raped and butchered by a serial killer – wouldn't provoke some amount of ambivalence if not outright repulsion. Indeed, the crew for the PBS show *Frontline*, visiting on set while she made the film, abandoned filming for the "American Porn" episode and stormed off in disgust. It can be very difficult to reconcile the hostility of the images with the idea that a woman has created them. But it is precisely this – their challenging nature – that makes them so worthy of discussion. If we are to consider the filmmakers' production practices – that is, their concern for performer comfort and safety, or lack thereof – and their public personae and self-representation rather than the content of their films, a case could be made for Mason's work as feminist, but not for Borden's. The latter's rejection of feminism and absolute willingness to exploit other women certainly preclude her work from that designation.

Royalle may be correct that the vast majority of women filmmakers in the industry are not making feminist porn, but I don't believe that we should dismiss their contributions to changing perceptions about femininity, a "woman's point of view," and the roles of women as cultural producers. Although the challenges they present are not perhaps as significant or progressive as the interventions made by overtly feminist filmmakers or in overtly feminist porn, they do force us to remain cognizant of the complexities of porn as an industry, a genre, a phenomenon.

In this chapter, I have been focusing primarily on how women are finding ways to take charge of their own sexuality for porn production. The women whom I've interviewed overwhelmingly describe the industry as supportive and open-minded, and those who have had experience working in Hollywood as well as porn tell me that Hollywood is far more sexist and far less interested in allowing women to step into leadership roles behind the camera. Nonetheless, structural sexism, racism, and homophobia do exist in the industry, and present a major challenge for women who want to interject radical perspectives into their porn and successfully market their product. For women like Shine Louise Houston and Courtney Trouble, who seek to create "authentic" queer porn that reflects the desires and the politics of an underserved community, finding distribution can be a daunting task and so they tend to work outside of the mainstream industry. Many women, however, do deem this struggle worthwhile.

Houston, who describes herself as "a queer woman of color who makes adult content," insists, in reference to an *AVN* article about interracial porn: "In the article one of the models comments that 'porno is not a place to become political.' I think it's the perfect place to become political. It's a place where money, sex, media, and ethics converge."¹⁴⁰ It is this very convergence that makes the adult video industry's gender politics so difficult to characterize. Its gendered star system creates opportunities for actresses to smoothly transition into the potentially empowering role of director or producer, even as the same gendered assumption that enables the transition – that branded women are the industry's most valuable commodity – leads the primary distribution channels to limit women filmmakers' output. In locating the convergence of money, sex, media, and ethics within the motivations and experiences of the many specific individuals that make up this huge and variegated industry, and using the insights derived therein to contextualize the work that they produce, we can move toward a meaningful understanding of

the contested nature of women's roles in the business of pornography. And if, as Madison Young suggests, it is indeed necessary for feminists to "inject [themselves] into [the mainstream industry's] machine" in order to effect meaningful change, then female directors have a very important role to play indeed.

¹ Tasha Reign, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, October 11, 2012.

² Diana Devoe, interview by author, audio recording, Woodland Hills, CA, October 19, 2010.

³ Aurora Snow, interview by author, phone recording, May 1, 2013.

⁴ Tasha Reign, interview.

⁵ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2009), 325, 326.

⁶ Constance Penley et al., "Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure," in *The Feminist Porn Book* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 9-10.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 258.

⁹ Jim Coles, president of Larry Flynt Publications, quoted in "How the Porn Business Works, What It Makes, and What Its Future May Be" ("American Porn"), *Frontline*, PBS, (February 21, 2002), accessed February 10, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/porn/business/howtheme.html>.

¹⁰ Jason Lyon, "The Storytellers," *Adult Video News* (April 2014), 62-69.

¹¹ It should be said that, although the title implies that the article profiles writer/directors, in fact one of the eight women (Jesse Jane) is exclusively a performer.

¹² *Weekly Variety* (January 28, 2013 – January 6, 2014) and *AVN* (January 2013 – December 2013). See also <http://www.boxoffice.com> and <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> for Hollywood box office data.

¹³ This includes a few repeat titles, as Mason, Jenna Haze, and Jacky St. James all had titles successful enough to remain in the top ten for two months in a row.

¹⁴ Data for the Academy Awards was taken from the *LA Times*’ “Oscar Winners and Nominees: Complete List 2013,” February 25, 2013, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/moviesnow/la-et-en-oscars-2013-nomination-list,0,1532667.story#axzz2pf6MMBqK>, and for the AVN Awards, from the *AVN Online* “Past Nominees” list, n.d., accessed March 10, 2014, <http://avnawards.avn.com/page/14>. I consulted the *Internet Adult Film Database* (iafd.com) for the directors of nominated adult films.

¹⁵ Constance Penley, Mireille Miller-Young, and Tristan Taormino, “Keynote Luncheon,” The Feminist Porn Conference, University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

¹⁶ Jennifer Miller, “Kink Unbound(?): Pursuing Pleasure and Profit in Pornography,” *Schuykill Graduate Journal* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 20-21, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.temple.edu/gradmag/volume10/miller.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Violet Blue, “Racist Porn and the Recession,” *SF Gate*, February 12, 2009, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://www.sfgate.com/living/article/Racist-Porn-and-the-Recession-Violet-Blue-2464322.php>.

¹⁹ Madison Young, “The Politics of Kinky Porn & Feminism” (workshop), The Feminist Porn Conference, University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

²⁰ Since 2006, the Canadian feminist sex shop Good For Her has sponsored the Feminist Porn Awards to recognize “those who are creating erotic media with a feminist sensibility that differs from what porn typically offers,” at http://www.goodforher.com/feminist_porn_awards.

²¹ Candida Royalle, “What’s a Nice Girl Like You...,” in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Tristan Taormino et al. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 68.

²² Jacky St. James, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, August 28, 2013.

²³ Jessica Drake, interview by author, audio recording, Canoga Park, CA, November 12, 2012.

²⁴ Adella Curry, email correspondence, May 5, 2014.

²⁵ Jessica Drake, interview.

²⁶ Technically, *Snuff* was transformed into a (fake) “snuff film” after the fact. Roberta and Michael Findlay had co-directed a film about a murderous hippie cult, *Slaughter* (1971), but failed to find distribution. Allan Shackleton of Monarch Releasing eventually took the film and shelved it. When press reports of snuff films began to surface in 1975, Shackleton brought *Slaughter* out of storage and filmed a coda in which a woman appears to be raped and then murdered on-screen, supposedly by members of the crew that had shot the portion of the film that had come before. Findlay is still considered to be a co-director of the film.

²⁷ Beverly LaBelle, “*Snuff*—the Ultimate in Woman Hating,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 274.

²⁸ Williams does mention one of her films (*Angel on Fire*, on page 134) in passing, but never discusses her as a filmmaker. In the chapter in which she profiles Candida Royalle and other

women filmmakers (“Sequels and Re-Visions: ‘A Desire of One’s Own’”), Williams’ focus is on pornography that attempts to depict a woman’s perspective, so perhaps she did not feel that Findlay’s work would not fall into that category.

²⁹ *Cult 70s Porno Director: Roberta Findlay* (“XXX Double Feature”: *Tiffany Minx* and *A Woman’s Torment*) DVD cover, Alpha Blue Archives, 2005.

³⁰ Roberta Findlay, “Interview” (DVD extras), *Cult 70s Porno Director: Roberta Findlay* DVD (XXX Double Feature: *Tiffany Minx* and *A Woman’s Torment*), Alpha Blue Archives, 2005.

³¹ Roberta Findlay, “Interview,” *Third Eye Cinema*, June 17, 2012, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/bigpoppaonline/2012/06/17/third-eye-cinema-61712-with-roberta-findlay>.

³² Ibid.

³³ In *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the title character murders one of her johns with a pair of scissors near the end of the film.

³⁴ Alfred Hitchcock famously said this, regarding how to keep film viewers entertained.

³⁵ For instance, both Veronica Hart and Madison Young made claims to this effect.

³⁶ Steve Jones, ““Why Are You Crying? Aren’t You Having Any Fun?”: Extreme Porn,” in Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 150.

³⁷ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 53.

³⁸ Ibid, 51.

³⁹ Alfred Hitchcock’s famous pronouncement, as quoted in Clover, 43.

⁴⁰ He starred alongside Lindsay Lohan in *The Canyons* (Paul Schraeder, 2013), and has been invited to speak at college campuses across the nation, on topics such as legislation, condom use, sexual health, and relationships.

⁴¹ Chris Morris, “The Dirty Dozen: Porn’s Most Popular Stars,” *CNBC*, January 14, 2013, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/id/100352810/page/13>.

⁴² These numbers vary slightly depending on who one talks to, but several actresses and filmmakers confirmed these numbers, and apparently Ron Jeremy did as well, according to Esteban in “The 21 Richest Adult Film Stars in the World,” *Refined Guy*, August 30, 2012, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.refinedguy.com/2012/08/30/the-21-richest-adult-film-stars-in-the-world/>.

⁴³ Arryn Lewin, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, September 28, 2010.

⁴⁴ Veronica Hart, interview by author, phone recording, December 8, 2010.

⁴⁵ “Interview: Lizzy Borden,” (“American Porn”), *Frontline*, *PBS*, February 21, 2002, accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/porn/interviews/borden.html>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jeni Talia, “Blonde on Blonde: Three Girl Playtime,” *Adult Cinema Review* (February 2003), 45.

⁴⁹ Aurora Snow, interview.

⁵⁰ In this context, “extreme acts” apparently refers to double penetration (DP), double anal, gangbangs, BDSM, and the like; as opposed to the common trajectory of girl-on-girl, followed by vaginal boy/girl sex, and eventually moving on to anal, DP, etc., followed by women performers entering the industry.

⁵¹ Aurora Snow, “Blood, Sweat, and Sex: My Hard Life in Porn,” *The Daily Beast*, March 18, 2013, accessed March 25, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/18/blood-sweat-and-sex-my-hard-life-in-porn.html>.

⁵² Most performers’ contracts undoubtedly limit (or preclude) producers’ legal liability in the case of injury, but it seems fair to assume that porn performers don’t sign these contracts under the assumption that they will be likely to have their “teeth knocked out” or the like.

⁵³ Aurora Snow, interview.

⁵⁴ Veronica Hart, interview.

⁵⁵ Diana Devoe, interview.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Amateur refers to productions featuring amateur talent, and pro-am generally features one or more professional porn performers working with amateurs who are (supposedly) new to the industry.

⁶⁰ Like Findlay, Wishman is best known for her sexploitation work, but also directed at least one hardcore feature: *Come with Me, My Love* (aka *The Haunted Pussy*, 1976).

⁶¹ Findlay had worked as an actress in sexploitation, but not as a performer in hardcore pornography.

⁶² Pete Warren, “Boardroom Eyes: From on Top of the Desk to Behind It, Tera Patrick and Other Ms. Triple X-ecutives are Now Calling the Money Shots,” *Adult Video News* (May 2006), reprinted at *AVN Online*, accessed June 5, 2006, <http://www.adultvideonews.com/archives/200605/index.html>.

⁶³ In conversation with the author, “Committee Review,” UCLA, October 30, 2009.

⁶⁴ Johannes Boie, “YouPorn Founder Jailed: A German Geek’s Fast Track to Dominating Internet Pornography,” Worldcrunch, December 12, 2012, accessed October 3, 2013, <http://worldcrunch.com/business-finance/youporn-founder-jailed-a-german-geek-039-s-fast-track-to-dominating-internet-pornography/thylmann-youporn-porn-internet-manwin-entrepreneur/c2s10387/>.

⁶⁵ Tasha Reign, interview.

⁶⁶ Diana Devoe, interview.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mireille Miller-Young, “Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors,” in *The Feminist Porn Book*, ed. Taormino et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 107.

⁷¹ “Cis-gendered” refers to a gender identity in which an individual’s experience of their own gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth. The term complements “transgender,” which refers to a gender identity in which an individual’s gendered experience does not match the sex that they were assigned at birth.

⁷² Mireille Miller-Young, “Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors,” 107.

⁷³ Aurora Snow, interview.

⁷⁴ Nina Hartley, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, August 19, 2010.

⁷⁵ Tasha Reign, interview.

⁷⁶ Nina Hartley, interview.

⁷⁷ Veronica Hart, interview.

⁷⁸ Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁸¹ Veronica Hart, interview.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Rape fantasies have been documented as highly popular among women, at least since the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953 and subsequently Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* in 1973.

⁸⁵ Dylan Ryan, "Fucking Feminism," in *The Feminist Porn Book*, ed. Taormino et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 123.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁷ "Queer Porn," *Crash Pad Series*, accessed April 2, 2014, <http://crashpadseries.com/queer-porn/>.

⁸⁸ This refers to a variety of non-normative sexual practices, including sexual fetishes, and is sometimes used interchangeably with BDSM.

⁸⁹ Dylan Ryan, "Fucking Feminism," 121.

⁹⁰ From the criteria for the "Feminist Porn Awards," *Good For Her*, accessed January 2, 2013, http://goodforher.com/feminist_porn_awards.

⁹¹ Tristan Taormino, "Calling the Shots: Feminist Porn in Theory and Practice," in *The Feminist Porn Book*, eds. Constance Penley et al. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 263.

⁹² Constance Penley et al., "Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure," 15.

⁹³ Tristan Taormino, "Calling the Shots," 263.

⁹⁴ Sinnamon Love, "A Question of Feminism," in *The Feminist Porn Book*, eds. Constance Penley et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 98-99.

⁹⁵ "My Black Ass 4," *Hot Movies*, accessed May 5, 2008,
<http://www.hotmovies.com/video/178217/My-Black-Ass-4/>.

⁹⁶ Sinnamon Love, "A Question of Feminism," 100.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁹ "Teenage Chocoholics," Adult DVD Empire, accessed March 2, 2014,
http://www.adultdvdempire.com/684553/teenage-chocoholics-porn-movies.html?partner_id=42023867&utm_source=ADT&utm_medium=portal&utm_campaign=adt_pricesearch_buyDVD.

¹⁰⁰ Aurora Snow, interview.

¹⁰¹ This is perhaps not as racist or degrading as it may seem, as the men of porn are nearly always relegated to the background and reduced to their genitalia. The March 2005 *AVN* cover story – "The Men of Porn: It's a Woman's World, Men Just Fuck in It!" – whose title says it all, attests to the fact that "male porn star" is a bit of an oxymoron, and "man" tends to be synonymous with "cock."

¹⁰² “Sexual numbers” is Linda Williams’ term for sex scenes in narrative pornography; she likens the porn genre as a whole to the musical, in terms of its incorporation of numbers (in this case, sexual activity rather than song and dance) into the story content—or, as is arguably the case in most porn, vice versa. I am applying the term to all-sex films as well, to refer to individual sex scenes.

¹⁰³ Jacky St. James, interview.

¹⁰⁴ Aurora Snow, interview.

¹⁰⁵ She makes this argument in her forthcoming book *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women, Sex Work, and Pornography*, and in “Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors,” 107.

¹⁰⁶ “Twink” is a slang term within gay male communities for a young or young-looking man with a slender physique and little or no facial and body hair. They typically appear as “bottoms,” or receptive partners, in gay male porn.

¹⁰⁷ Nica Noelle, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, September 9, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Tristan Taormino, interview by author, phone recording, August 14, 2011.

¹¹⁰ AdultDVDTalk.com user bono-ONE in a review of *Riot Sluts*, June 17, 2004, accessed January 4, 2012, <http://www.adultdvdtalk.com/review/riot-sluts>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Aurora Snow, interview.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Jeni Talia, “Behind-the-Scenes with Elegant Angel’s Director Mason: Unveiling *Mason’s Dirty Trixxx*,” *Adult Cinema Review* (February 2003), 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹¹⁶ Mason, "... On Directing the Hardest of Hardcore," in *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, ed. Carly Milne (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 137-8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹¹⁸ Lux Alptraum, "Of Amateur Porn and Abuse: The Uncomfortable Truths that Real World Sex Reveals," *Boinkology 101*, January 14, 2014, accessed February 21, 2014, <https://medium.com/boinkology-101/851fbda0625f>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Buzz Killington, "Deep Inside Mason: Enigmatic Director Talks about Her Future at OpenLife Entertainment," *Adult Video News* (September 2013), 44.

¹²² Mason, "... On Directing the Hardest of Hardcore," 137.

¹²³ Ibid., 137.

¹²⁴ Candida Royalle, interview by author, phone recording, June 7, 2006.

¹²⁵ See, for instance, Candida Royalle, "Porn in the USA," in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 545.

¹²⁶ Jeni Talia, "Behind-the-Scenes with Elegant Angel's Director Mason: Unveiling *Mason's Dirty Trixxx*," *Adult Cinema Review* (February 2003), 28.

¹²⁷ Buzz Killington, "Deep Inside Mason," 117.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹²⁹ Sinnamon Love, in conversation with the author at the Feminist Porn Conference, University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

¹³⁰ Luke Ford, “Mason – As You’ve Never Seen Her” (Interview), Luke Is Back, January 17, 2005, accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.lukeisback.com/stars/stars/mason.htm>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Mason, “... On Directing the Hardest of Hardcore,” *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, ed. Carly Milne, (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 129.

¹³³ I heard some version of this statement from several different cameramen and male directors (who shall remain nameless) on porn sets and at conventions.

¹³⁴ Luke Ford, “Mason – As You’ve Never Seen Her” (Interview).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ellen McLarney, “The Burqa in Vogue: Fashioning Afghanistan,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 5:1 (Winter 2009), 19.

¹³⁷ Mason, “... On Directing the Hardest of Hardcore,” 130.

¹³⁸ These subjects asked to remain anonymous in criticizing others in the industry.

¹³⁹ Here I refer back to Radner’s notion of the girly film, and my perception of Reign’s adoption of it in her porn, which emphasizes “girl power” and conventional femininity in equal measure.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Rich, “Naked Capitalists.”

CHAPTER 3

Explicitly Feminist: Queer, Lesbian/Dyke, and Feminist Porn Production

Feminist porn is a genre that is a social movement. – Dylan Ryan

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. – Jiz Lee

In the summer of 2006, I attended a rather remarkable screening at Outfest, an annual LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer) film festival held in Los Angeles. Sitting among the audience of mostly women, waiting for *The Crash Pad* to begin, both the excitement and the discomfort was palpable, as we anticipated the experience of a public porn screening. Directed by Shine Louise Houston, *The Crash Pad* would go on to become something of a sensation, skyrocketing Houston to the level of superstar within the admittedly insular world of queer porn production. Back in that theater in 2006, the audience erupted with cheers and whoops and exuberant clapping when the film's first orgasm appeared on the screen.

This was a far cry from the response that Nan Kinney and Debi Sundahl had received when their films, *Private Pleasures* and *Shadows* (produced for their new lesbian porn production company, Fatale Media), premiered at the San Francisco Frameline Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at the Castro Theater in 1985. Rather than experiencing antagonism from straight men or religious groups, Kinney found that anti-porn feminists expressed the most hostility toward her lesbian porn production. Kinney recounts the dramatic response the films received in this context:

I was standing out in the lobby, because we made t-shirts and we had videos to sell and posters – we did the whole merchandising thing. [...] After about five minutes, I hear

booing, hissing, and then also some cheering. [...] It really had a very intense impact on the audience. A lot of the women were leaving and coming out to me; I was like the sitting duck in the lobby. No one else is around – they’re coming to me, and they’re threatening me, trying to knock stuff over. It was the anti-porn feminists, very strong at that time. I actually felt very threatened by them, but they continued showing the movie – they didn’t stop it or anything. [...] We didn’t really show any more movies there.¹

The mainstream adult industry had been producing films with “girl-on-girl” content since the earliest days of the genre, but films that include that content are, like all mainstream output, marketed primarily to straight men (and increasingly, straight women and couples). Porn made by and for lesbians, however, was still a relative novelty in the mid-‘80s, at which time hostility among certain lesbian feminists was directed, in particular, toward the appropriation of traditionally heterosexual acts, symbols, and power dynamics.

Historically, gay and lesbian porn have been overtly politicized in a way that straight porn never has; because LGBTIQ bodies and sex acts have been subject to the biopolitical control of legal regulation and censorship in a way that straight, gender-conforming bodies and couplings have not, from the very beginning, showing queer sex on screen was a radical act. When gay and lesbian porn films began to appear alongside straight porn films, they were emerging from very different histories and codes of representation. Although all pornography was underground, illicit, and illegal until the early 1970s, only gay and lesbian sexualities and identities were completely banned from being depicted throughout the decades of implementation of the Production Code in Hollywood. Lesbian porn had a different set of politics to contend with, however, in the form of lesbian separatist ideologies that resisted the

imitation of heterosexuality. Kinney explains that, in the '70s and '80s, "any kind of dildos were really frowned upon – or any even S&M [or] domination."²

Meanwhile, by 1989, when *On Our Backs* sponsored a night of female erotica with Susie Bright at the Castro, "the reaction was quite different from that in 1985. The lesbian crowd spilled onto the streets; there were complaints again – this time the chief complaint was that there was not *sufficient* lesbian erotica to satisfy demand."³ A play on the title of the feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, *On Our Backs* was the first magazine to feature erotica made by and for lesbians. Nan Kinney, Debi Sundahl, and Susie Bright were the original editors, and as Josh Sides explains in *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco*, "Among lesbians, the initial reception to *On Our Backs* was chilly. *Off Our Backs* described the magazine's content as 'pseudo-feminist' and 'so-called "feminist" pornography' [...] Kinney, Bright, and Sundahl received threatening letters and women's bookstores refused to carry their magazine."⁴ By 1990, Kinney and Sundahl's film, *Suburban Dykes*, would lay the groundwork for future lesbian and queer porn production through its inclusion of BDSM and sex with a dildo. Heather Butler suggests that "the problems presented in this film illustrate what lesbians were up against during the post-sex wars, postseparatism, and even postassimilation era: how should lesbians have sex? How *do* lesbians (real ones) have sex?"⁵

So a lot had changed within a few short years, and the demand for lesbian and feminist pornography was there, but it would be a few decades before the supply would catch up. When I first began researching for this project in 2005, feminist and queer porn were all but nonexistent. In the words of Shine Louise Houston,

There wasn't a whole lot of dyke porn out at that time [the early 2000s]. There were a lot of things that were pretty much like seminal filmmaking in this genre, ground-breaking in

the '80s, but then there seemed to be kind of a dry spell. Fatale had kind of spearheaded making dyke porn. Candida Royale, that happened around then. [...] Then finally, SIR Productions and Jackie [Strano]/Shar [Rednour] came out with their stuff [in the late '90s]. [...] There seemed to be a resurgence of women producers. And about a year after, it was just kind of dead.⁶

Indeed, I had also found that the promise of the 1980s had seemed to have fizzled out by the early to mid-2000s. In 1984, Candida Royale had founded Femme Productions with Lauren Neimi, and singlehandedly addressed straight women as a viable market for pornography. Initially, the idea of porn for women was dismissed as an absurdity: "In the beginning, the men in the business told me that there is no 'couples' market, and that women don't watch porn. [...] But I knew that a new market had opened up that no one else was addressing."⁷ Prior to this, feminist filmmakers like Annie Sprinkle and other women filmmakers like Roberta Findlay had directed the occasional adult video in the '70s and early '80s, but they were not creating product for a market of women or couples. As Sprinkle explains of her work as a performer in mainstream porn and director of *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, "I certainly lived my life as a feminist, but the porn I made was really more about exploring male fantasy."⁸ The recent resurgence and proliferation, however, in the creation of porn with investments in feminism and identity politics, on the level of production as well as representation, has contributed dramatically to the diversification of cinematic sexual expression.

Although I will, following the authors of *The Feminist Porn Book* and others, distinguish between feminist, queer, and lesbian/dyke porn, which is typically independently produced, and mainstream porn, which is typically marketed to straight men and produced for a larger studio and/or distributed by one of the major distribution companies, I also would like to emphasize

from the beginning the overlaps and intersections between the mainstream industry and these other somewhat more marginal production cultures. Madison Young, a feminist- and queer-identified filmmaker based in San Francisco, told me:

There are some amazing people in LA that I love to work with that have incredible visions, like Nina Hartley and Eon McKai and Tristan Taormino and Nica Noelle, April Flores, Kimberley Kane. These are all really wonderful visionaries, and people that are involved either from political, educational, and/or artistic backgrounds that they're bringing into the adult industry. And many, if not all, of those people that I just named are working within the mainstream porn industry. My films as well are being distributed by Pulse, which is the distributor for Vivid and for Teravision, so [...] I think that people can definitely work within the mainstream and infiltrate into the mainstream and still have a really clear vision and be making a difference within the adult industry.⁹

Indeed, as mentioned in previous chapters, Tristan Taormino, although an avowed feminist, resolutely works in the mainstream. So while it is useful to think in terms of distinctions between production cultures, distribution channels, target demographics, and filmmakers' intentions (i.e. political vs. commercial), it is also productive always to bear in mind that there are major affinities between the mainstream and independent sectors.

Royalle is generally credited as the first filmmaker to attempt to address the (heterosexual) women and couples market, and to specifically make films from "a [straight] woman's perspective." She did so by creating her own avenues of production, and ultimately distribution as well, so in that sense, her work can be described as independent. Initially, her studio, Femme Productions, could also be distinguished from the mainstream with regard to target audience: hers was the only porn to address straight women and couples. Now, however,

most of the major mainstream studios have created entire lines, or at least a few titles, directed at straight women and couples, and so distinctions based on demographics are collapsing. In regard to the obstacles she faced at the time, Royalle says,

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.¹⁰

In order to achieve greater creative and business control, however, she founded Femme Distribution with her husband in 1986. When I spoke to Royalle in 2006, she explained that, “The market keeps coming of age, let’s say. So that if people come of age, and they start looking at movies, if they want something different [from mainstream porn] – something like mine – I’m just about the only stuff that’s out there.”¹¹

She has continued to produce films for Femme Productions, and to give other women opportunities to direct for her company. But her early films continue to sell to this day – a remarkable feat, in light of the ephemeral nature of most mainstream pornography. In attempting to explain the longevity of her films from the 1980s, Royalle told me that, “they are so unique, and appeal to a particular market that there really isn’t much out there for.”¹² In 2006, Tristan Taormino would release *Chemistry, vol. 1*, and thus begin to usher in a new generation of feminist pornography, but despite Royalle’s insistences that the market was there, for several decades, Royalle’s work was in fact just about the only porn of its kind: made with an audience of straight women and couples in mind, with higher production values, a dedication to narrative,

safer sex practices, less of a focus on the genitals, more of a focus on women's pleasure, and a resistance to money shots.

Since the early years of Femme Productions, Royalle has reassessed her initial assumptions: "Perhaps my biggest complaint about my own movies is that I now like a bit of rawness. [...] Everyone says: 'Oh, women want sex soft and pretty, like a Harlequin novel.' It's as if women are being protected, and maybe I'm a little guilty of that too."¹³ In evaluating assumptions like these, it is important not to conflate the categories of porn for women, porn by women, and feminist porn. The latter, as more recent commentators suggest, should be defined less by its content than by the filmmakers' motivations and production practices. Lorraine Hewitt, Artistic Director of the Feminist Porn Awards, suggests that,

We don't use the word feminist to mean a certain kind of sex, essentially, or a movie that just has a lot of story, or a movie that doesn't include kink. [...] We want to really acknowledge that women are varied, that their desires are varied, that there is also intersectionality.¹⁴

In terms of content, feminist pornography – as a subgenre of pornography and a movement – involves a commitment to diversity and the ever-troubled notion of authenticity. As indicated in the previous chapter, mainstream pornography is equally concerned with authenticity, but generally for different reasons and in different ways. The much-discussed money shot, for instance, derives from the imperative to show visual proof of pleasure, as Linda Williams famously contends in *Hard Core*.¹⁵ It has since become a largely thoughtless and unquestioned convention within the mainstream. The industry assumption is that (straight, male) viewers expect and want to see money shots, such that when Royalle approached a producer in the mid-'80s, and told him that she did not intend to include cum shots, "he said, 'Oh, my God!' and

warned my investors and said, ‘She’s going to lose all your money.’”¹⁶

More recently Nica Noelle decided to question this overused convention, so she posted to a forum on Adult DVD Talk, to attempt to discover whether and why viewers wanted to see cum shots. Some users suggested that it was important, as proof that “the guy actually somewhat enjoyed having sex with the girl,”¹⁷ but others suggested that cum shots are “not at all important” and that it seems “unnatural”¹⁸ or patently “unrealistic to want to pull out.”¹⁹ The users who suggest that external ejaculation seems “unrealistic” are pointing to the act’s lack of authenticity in terms of its inability to reflect the way many (heterosexual) couples have sex, even if the act does remain authentic in its literal depiction of a particular performer’s sexual pleasure. Regardless, the vast majority of mainstream porn sex scenes culminate in a money shot to this day.

Lesbian/dyke, queer, and feminist pornography, on the other hand, all share a commitment to a different sort of authenticity. They all seek, to one extent or another to depict the types of sex that “real” people have, and to represent the diversity of bodies, sex acts, sexualities, and personalities that exist in the world. All three also define themselves against the mainstream, as redressing its erasures, blind spots, and misrepresentations. They use “sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations”²⁰ and, in that sense, are more or less politically motivated. There are major overlaps among them, and most lesbian/dyke and queer porn could also be described as feminist. As in sexperimental filmmaking, then, the will to authenticity often involves the diversification and revision of dominant images of gendered, classed, racialized subjects.

For my purposes, lesbian/dyke porn as a category encompasses all porn made by, about, and primarily for lesbian (or bisexual) women, as opposed to the girl-on-girl content made

primarily by and for straight men. Queer porn, as will be elaborated in greater depth below, is dedicated to showcasing diversity with regard to gender, sexuality, race, and other identity categories, and to depicting non-normative couplings (or groupings, as the case may be), sexual practices, and representational codes. Unlike lesbian porn, queer porn might feature heterosexuals (for instance, straight-identified trans* performers) and/or cis-gendered men, as long as there are queer or non-normative elements to the sex that they're having. Feminist porn, according to the editors of *The Feminist Porn Book*, "considers sexual representation – and its production – a site for resistance, intervention, and change."²¹ The same can generally be said of queer porn, but the primary distinction is that "feminist porn" can also describe films that include straight sex and/or be marketed primarily to straight audiences.

In the last few years, the markets for queer, lesbian, feminist, and couples porn have grown exponentially. As Tristan Taormino puts it, "Feminists, obviously, have been making porn since the late '70s and early '80s, so this idea of feminist porn isn't a new one, but it certainly has taken hold in a different way, I think, in the past decade."²² Australian filmmaker Ms. Naughty has created a helpful infographic to illustrate some of the influential figures in feminist porn Production, though she acknowledges that it is "by no means complete"²³:

higher class of pornography. The fan mail that Candida Royalle received in the '80s suggested that women and couples “wanted to see it all, but they wanted to see it done with taste and subtlety rather than having it rubbed in their face.”²⁶ Another reason may be that, due to their political leanings, queer and feminist viewers are more likely to be willing to pay for ethically produced, or what Tristan Taormino calls “organic, fair trade” porn.²⁷

In a continuation and expansion of her feminist mission, Royalle created “Femme Chocolat,” an “ethnic” line featuring titles directed by women of color. Press releases frame Femme Chocolat as politically motivated: “By placing the reins of production directly in their hands, we seek to empower women of color by giving them a place to share their unique vision of their own sexuality with all who seek to observe, learn and enjoy.”²⁸ While it is indeed laudable for Royalle to create avenues of access for other women filmmakers – and women of color specifically – to express their own visions, the underlying assumption that a woman of a particular race or ethnicity would necessarily want to direct films exclusively about that particular race or ethnicity is not entirely unproblematic, as it potentially essentializes the experiences and identities of women of color. As such, it is worth questioning why she created a separate line for films directed by and for women of color, rather than simply hiring them to direct whatever they so choose for Femme Productions.

In the mainstream, white men largely control the money as producers and distributors, and dole it out as they see fit to directors. Diana DeVoe complains that she has been pigeonholed by producers and distributors according to her racial and gender identities, and thus only gets hired to direct black, interracial, or girl-on-girl titles:

When I go to get a gig, they look at me and they say, here's a black series, here's a girl series, here's a black girl series, and so I very rarely shoot white males. I'll go years

without seeing a white penis. [laughing] And actually I had a couple [of] white male talent be upset with me because of that. And I'm like, do you know who I'm working for? What in the hell do you want me to do? "Well, why don't they give you a white series?" I don't know – I guess they don't think I can do one. But, yeah, that's always, always, always the case.²⁹

So despite the best of intentions for the development of Femme Chocolat – creating feminist solidarity – and though the products created for it may well be innovative and empowering for both the directors and their viewers, the fact remains that the line effectively segregates porn by, for, and about women of color from “everyone else” (i.e. Femme Productions porn made by, about, and primarily for white women and couples). This mirrors the ghettoization of black and interracial porn in the mainstream industry, and as in the mainstream industry, the economic model for Femme Chocolat involves a white person – though, in this case, a woman – controlling the finances in the production of porn made by and for women of color, which is then marked as different by being distributed for a different line. Meanwhile, Royale features only white women (like Gloria Leonard, Veronica Hart, and Petra Joy) as guest directors for the primary Femme line, which remains unmarked – there is no “Vanilla” to the “Chocolat.”

Despite these potentially problematic elements of the line for which it was created, the first Femme Chocolat film to be released, *AfroDite Superstar* (2007), nonetheless “addresses and subverts stereotypical representations of black women in hip-hop culture and pornographic culture.”³⁰ Directed by Abiola Abrams, working under the historically charged pseudonym Venus Hottentot, *AfroDite Superstar* tells the story of AfroDite Jones (played by Simone Valentino), a wealthy young black woman from Beverly Hills, whose father is a hip-hop media mogul. It opens with a film within a film: a grainy, handheld shot of AfroDite – seemingly

shooting herself in a sort of video diary – in which she self-identifies as a “BAP,” or Black American Princess, and adds that her dad “invented black music.” By immediately establishing her privilege as well as the ways in which she may be marginalized through the reflexive format of a film within a film, *AfroDite Superstar* works to resist stereotypes from the very beginning. Although this will be a narrative about hip-hop culture, the opening scene suggests, it will not be one to reproduce clichés. In the next scene, the appropriately named “C.E.O.” (Mr. Marcus) sees AfroDite and her best friend Isis (India) performing at a karaoke bar, and approaches them to offer AfroDite a chance at stardom.

In the scenes that follow, AfroDite initially resists the draw of fame by insisting that she is “not into hip-hop” and that Isis is the one with genuine talent, but C.E.O. and Isis together convince her to take the opportunity. In this way, the film reveals the machinations and hypocrisies of mainstream music culture, and begins to acknowledge the underlying gender politics as well. AfroDite is chosen as the “talent” and Isis as the lyricist seemingly because the former is somewhat more conventionally attractive. As it turns out, nepotism is another factor, as we eventually learn that C.E.O. had approached them originally at AfroDite’s father’s suggestion. In any case, with a new name – MC Dytie – and a new look, complete with a blonde wig and padded bra, AfroDite’s most significant transformation is that of her persona. When shooting herself in the confessional/video diary scenes she always speaks with a proper, aristocratic sort of accent. When appearing in music videos or on talk shows as MC Dytie, however, she flaunts the Compton slang and accent that she has been trained to adopt by her PR team. This functions to undercut typical mainstream media formulations of blackness and points to the limiting roles for black performers in media industries.

These ideas are further emphasized in several scenes, as when the white man in charge of urbanizing AfroDite's speech approaches her and asks her what she's "spittin'," and she replies, "I never took Ebonics. Translation, please?" The idea of the gangsta or thug as a manufactured image perpetuated endlessly in hip-hop culture is reinforced again in a scene toward the end when a male rapper, who performs under the name Criminal (Justin Long), is revealed to be a Yale grad named Chester. The juxtaposition of these narrative scenes with music videos, like "My Ass Is Cash," in which MC Dytie claims to be "straight outta Compton," and talk show appearances in which she smokes a "blunt" and speaks with the very slang that she had derided earlier as Ebonics, belies the film's preoccupation with authenticity and the real. This preoccupation is somewhat remarkable for an adult film, as even feminist and queer porn have tended to prize authenticity as a genuine goal. Here, though, authenticity and the real – at least in the heavily mediated worlds of film, television, and music production – are revealed to be illusions, as stereotypes are revealed to be constructed. At the same time, the film offers up an "authentic" persona in the video diaries, affirmed as all the more so through its comparison to the evident artificiality of her constructed persona. These sequences incorporate the auto-pornographic mode into the diegesis, as the character films herself in order to convey her own "true" self, her sexual subjectivity.

Throughout the film, one of AfroDite's friends, Buttafly, repeatedly quotes famous feminists in response to perceived slights and misogynist lines and actions. "A pedestal is as much a prison as any small, confined space," she says, quoting Gloria Steinem, after witnessing a man rudely tell a woman, "I put you on a pedestal – what more do you want?" The words float across the screen to emphasize their thematic resonance and to attribute the quote. This Brechtian tactic is implemented several other times in the film, with quotes from Naomi Wolf and Janis

Joplin, among others, and each time serves to position the characters in *AfroDite Superstar* within a history of (white) feminist activism in popular culture arenas. Like AfroDite's video diaries, Buttafly's feminist proclamations serve to critique and redress the male control exerted over women's images and identities in the film's main narrative.

Naming also clearly serves a significant symbolic function in the film: all of the women are named for goddesses from various mythologies, while the men are named for their professions. AfroDite is named for Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love; Isis, for the Egyptian goddess "from whom all becoming arose"; Kali, for the Hindu goddess of creation, preservation, and destruction; and Pandora, for the "Earth-goddess" and "first woman."³¹ Meanwhile, the men are named simply C.E.O., Road Dawg, and Criminal. Although we will learn that there is more to the men than their professions (and indeed that Criminal is not in fact a criminal, but a manufactured personality), through naming, the women in the film are nonetheless endowed with a symbolic significance, while the men's functions remain resolutely practical. This constitutes a reversal, in terms of the valuation of gendered bodies and identities in American culture at large, and in pornography specifically. The men are arguably objectified by being reduced to their roles, whereas the women are elevated through association with powerful, mythical beings. At the same time, the naming paradigm seems to constitute an acknowledgement that men are typically defined, and limited, through their roles or professions, while women may be put on pedestals – a phenomenon that Buttafly overtly criticizes, by way of Gloria Steinem, in the earlier scene.

In the end, immediately prior to the film's culminating sex scene featuring AfroDite and C.E.O., AfroDite enters a bathroom and looks at herself in the mirror. She proceeds to take off her wig and false lashes and to pull the padding from out of her bra, and says aloud, "Be a

woman in love with herself.” This self-affirming scene leads into a rather playful sexual number, in which AfroDite and C.E.O. exchange pillow talk and laugh. As he performs cunnilingus, C.E.O. pauses to ask, “How am I doing? Am I performing my executive duties?” The gendered power dynamics established by the narrative to this point have effectively been reversed, and from this moment on, AfroDite is resolutely in charge. The sex scene transitions into a return to the talk show, Suite Veracity, but this time MC Dytie has dropped the gangsta act. She announces that she, Isis, and C.E.O. have formed a supergroup, and the implication is that the record will be set straight: AfroDite can be herself, Isis can be recognized for her lyrical talents, and both women can have equal standing with C.E.O.

So, despite the film’s questioning of notions of the real up until this point, *AfroDite Superstar*’s ending privileges the virtues of authenticity. “Be yourself. Free yourself. Know thyself,” pronounces Buttafly, as the closing credits start to reel. Otherwise, the film ends as it began, with AfroDite dancing in front of a brick wall while Buttafly spins a record nearby – an image that evokes *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and indeed Abrams has said that “Spike Lee is a huge influence” on her work.³² Like Lee’s film, *AfroDite Superstar* engages with contemporary racial politics in America and showcases a variety of distinct African-American characters rather than simply reproducing the same problematic stereotypes – the magical negro, the thug, the black best friend, the mammy, the sassy black woman – found throughout both Hollywood’s and pornography’s long histories. Unlike Lee’s film, however, Abrams’ is very much concerned with gender politics and intersectionality as well.

With regard to her pseudonym and her motivations for creating the film, Abrams says, “Women of color are over-sexualized in our society. Our bodies are everywhere, but our voices are absent. I made this film to present our voice in this arena.”³³ So despite the film’s

questioning of notions of authenticity in media depictions more broadly through interrogations of stereotypes of black identity, Abrams nonetheless seems to believe that authentic images of women of color – and, specifically, created by women of color – can and should be produced. Significantly, despite her previous successes as “a mainstream filmmaker, writer, and TV host on BET, HBO, and NBC,”³⁴ Abrams chose pornography as the medium for the expression of these ideas.

In line with the many filmmakers who told me that the porn industry is in fact more welcoming to women seeking creative control than Hollywood is, Abrams apparently found adult video to be more conducive to a narrative about black women’s subjectivity. She admits that, “I had no long-term interests in working in [pornography]. My work is about empowering women and specifically in the areas of love, sex, dating and relationships but not necessarily in sexual content alone.”³⁵ So it seems likely that, had Abrams had the opportunity to present these ideas in a mainstream film or television context instead, she would have. The agency enabled by the porn industry is not without its limitations, however, as

The film was more explicit that [*sic*] I would have preferred because of the financial obligations of being a corporate artist. There was also much more to the story which was devastating to cut, but ultimately, with a low budget and short shooting schedule, my producer had to focus on our deliverables, which was to make sure that the sex scenes were in the can.³⁶

The above information is included in the press kit for *AfroDite Superstar*, so Abrams clearly felt the need to remark publicly upon the constraints on her creative control under which she had to operate when making the film.

So it is important to situate the film within the context of its production, directed by a black woman who had previously worked primarily in a very different sort of production culture, and produced by a white woman whose intentions may be noble, but who nonetheless occupies a role similar to that of C.E.O. in the film. Abrams says that Candida Royalle “challenged my critical thinking and it was a really great experience,” but she adds that, “She’s a very astute businesswoman.”³⁷ The impetus for creating *Femme Chocolat* is doubtless the desire to exploit another potential market, in addition to any sort of ideological motivations, and although the line did provide an avenue of access to creative control for Abrams, it did not do so without placing constraints on her agency. Royalle acts as the gatekeeper, providing the funding and dictating what needed to be cut (parts of the narrative) and added (sex scenes) as a result. Abrams runs up against a different sort of gatekeeping in mainstream contexts, as when she was prevented from attending the AVN Awards, which, in a significant intersection of feminist porn with the mainstream, recognized *AfroDite Superstar* with seven nominations:

I was so excited, and so proud. Unfortunately, one of my executive producers at BET told me that I couldn’t go. You know, it’s a commercial network, and so Procter and Gamble and these kinds of people would protest in a minute, and they told me I couldn’t go.³⁸

The stigma associated with pornography is one reason Abrams cites for choosing to adopt the pseudonym of Venus Hottentot to direct the film, but she also chose the name as a way to “commemorate the life of a forgotten South African woman who was sexually exploited in Europe in the nineteenth century.”³⁹

In the late 19th century, the so-called “Hottentot Venus,” Sarah Baartman, was abducted from her home in South Africa and exhibited throughout Europe as a sexual oddity. Her genitals

and buttocks were displayed and exoticized – cited as evidence of African “primitive” sexuality – for Western consumption.⁴⁰ Evelyn Hammonds, in “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” argues that, ever since, black women’s sexuality in the United States has been constructed as “simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses.”⁴¹ Adopting the pseudonym Venus Hottentot is a way for Abrams to reclaim black women’s sexuality, and her use of this name in the creation of an overtly feminist film text enables her to reflect the black woman’s gaze back onto itself and onto the power imbalances and structural inequalities of white America (specifically in the realms of media production). It is perhaps an acknowledgement of this act of reversal that she chose to reverse the order of the names – from Hottentot Venus to Venus Hottentot.

This idea of taking the power back largely distinguishes overtly feminist, queer, and lesbian/dyke porn production from that of the mainstream. In distinguishing between her own film collaborations with Shar Rednour and the output of the mainstream adult video industry, Jackie Strano says,

We own our own company. We’re not working for a male-owned company. We’re not giving our sexuality to a male owner that is making more money than us as its stars. It’s all ours. We put our bodies onscreen, and distribute it – we own it.⁴²

This is the same model that Royalle operated under when she created Femme Productions. The power dynamics shifted when she created her “ethnic” line, but even in that case, the porn production does not involve a woman giving her “sexuality to a male owner that is making more money.” Queer, feminist, and lesbian/dyke porn tends to be distinguished, then, by its independence from mainstream financial models. Queer, feminist, and lesbian/dyke porn filmmakers typically bypass established (generally male-owned) studios, to self-produce and

often self-distribute, or go through one of the existing channels – like Good Vibrations, Fatale Media, Femme Productions, or Pink and White Productions – that was initially created by feminists and has subsequently achieved a great enough market share to support ongoing feminist/queer/lesbian porn production. Some, like Madison Young and Courtney Trouble, produce independently but eventually secured mainstream distribution deals.⁴³

In the 1990s, major studios like Vivid, VCA, and Wicked, upon witnessing the success of Femme Productions, created their own porn marketed to couples, “that reflected Royalle’s vision and generally followed a formula of softer, gentler, more romantic porn with storylines and high production values.”⁴⁴ Despite the mainstream’s co-opting of the look and format of the increasingly successful subgenre developed by Royalle, however, the content of feminist, queer, and lesbian/dyke porn productions can vary widely. Generally speaking, content and other surface similarities are a less productive way to distinguish between feminist/queer/lesbian porn and the mainstream than are the production/labor practices and the motivations behind the making of a given film. Non-normative bodies and identities, like butch lesbians or transmen, are unlikely to be found in mainstream productions, but femme lesbians might be found in any of those categories. Jackie Strano’s and Shar Rednour’s films, however, do not look like the lesbian porn produced within the mainstream, and indeed one of their motivations for creating SIR productions was that they “wanted to see butch/femme sex, and there was nothing out there.”⁴⁵

In addition to the definitions elaborated in previous chapters, the editors of *The Feminist Porn Book*, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Mireille Miller-Young, and Tristan Taormino, delineate their subject in the following ways:

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.⁴⁶

This definition distinguishes feminist porn from the mainstream as providing an alternative on several levels: in terms of content, assumptions about viewership (and, by implication, also marketing imperatives), labor practices, and political intentionality. They acknowledge some ambiguities, however, and do not necessarily suggest that mainstream and feminist porn are mutually exclusive. Taormino’s work, of course, occupies both categories. Additionally, some of the filmmakers, like Nica Noelle, who have been repeatedly recognized at the Feminist Porn Awards do not in fact identify as feminist, suggesting that the political intentions of a filmmaker may not matter when it comes to labeling a given film. The one factor that seems most important is that of labor practices – porn cannot be deemed feminist if its production involves lack of consent, unsafe working conditions, inequitable compensation, or other types of exploitation of performers. Feminist porn is the broadest of the categories; as suggested above,

most queer and lesbian/dyke porn can also be described as feminist, but feminist porn can encompass straight pornography as well. In terms of content, it is not so much what is included or excluded from the porn that marks off a given film as feminist (or queer/lesbian/dyke); beyond a general commitment to diversity, feminist politics of porn representation tend to hinge less on whether an act or a body is depicted and more on *how* it is depicted.

Unlike Candida Royalle, who insisted from the beginning that Femme films should not include money shots at all, Tristan Taormino works from the assumption that she should include any sex acts that her performers find appealing. In this way, even if a given image – of, say, a man ejaculating onto a woman’s face – may at first glance seem non- or even anti-feminist, the production model is distinctly feminist. Taormino makes a point of meeting with her performers before a shoot, in order to ascertain their personal preferences, fantasies, comfort levels, and so on. When it comes time to shoot the scenes, she is a proponent of the importance of contextualization:

If someone wants to do something that I personally find problematic, I usually will ask them to talk about it specifically in the interview portion. So it’s like, “I want to hear about...” Or if something’s just kind of edgy, I think people need to hear really clearly, “This is what I want and this is what I like,” rather than just seeing it as a repetition.⁴⁷

Here she distinguishes between mere repetition of a seemingly misogynist image or power dynamic, and the articulation of a specific woman’s fantasies made visible. This is similar to mainstream pornographer Mason’s distinction between misogynist and empowering images of degradation, which hinges on viewers’ willingness to trust that Mason and her performers have a genuine interest in these kinds of fantasies and scenarios. Unlike Mason, Taormino insists on demonstrating the distinction to the audience through contextualization via these

interview/confessional scenes. In this way, she is able to respect her performers' desires and subjectivities, and at the same time remain conscious of how the images that she creates might be received. We might call this the performance of authenticity.

Taormino took this idea to another level when she first decided to create her *Rough Sex* series, as a way to challenge herself, to see if she could take the most seemingly "anti-feminist" kinds of images and make them feminist:

So you are going to see spanking, spitting, hair-pulling, slapping, rough sex, face-fucking, manhandling – you're going to see all of that stuff. But it's contextualized in an entirely different way. And I think the context is really crucial. It's really crucial. And that's why for me, the interview section is not a behind-the-scenes feature or bonus on the DVD. It's part of the narrative. You have to watch it before you see the sex. And that's really deliberate, because that is part of the story.⁴⁸

Although the hypothetical viewer could choose to skip past the interviews when watching her film, her point nonetheless stands. By including the interviews or confessionals within the body of the film rather than segregating them out into the bonus features of the DVD, Taormino makes an implicit statement about their importance and relevance to the sex scenes with which they are juxtaposed.

An anecdote that Taormino shared about shooting a scene that she was ultimately unable to include in the *Rough Sex* series is worth quoting at length, because it is instructive in considering the relationship between production and representation in the creation of feminist porn:

I originally shot this scene with Marie Luv, who I had worked with before. I called her up and said, I'm doing this series. It's based on female fantasies. Tell me about one of

your most intense fantasies – a fantasy you never were able to bring to life, something you’ve been thinking about. And she said right away, “Well, I have a rape fantasy. And I’ve told this to other people, and other porn producers have even said, ‘Hey, do you have an idea for the scene?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, I have a rape fantasy!’ And they’re like, ‘No no no no! NO!’” So a bunch of people – both in her personal life and in porn – had already censored and shamed her for this fantasy. And she said basically, no one will do it. And that really lights a fire under me. It’s like, oh, no one’ll do it? Oh, I’ll do it! So I talked to her more about it. I mean, this is a loaded topic, so I really need her to break it down for me, and I need that first for me, and then I need that on camera obviously. So she picks Mark Davis as her partner, who she’s worked with a whole bunch of times. He’s kinky in real life, so he’s got skills, and she really, really trusts him. And so we shoot this scene, and as the scene is happening, it’s like, really the most intense thing I’ve ever shot. [...] And then I start to talk to the crew afterwards, and they’re all a little bit shell-shocked. And then they start saying, “This is the most intense thing I’ve ever witnessed, and the most intense thing I’ve ever shot,” and some of these people have been in porn for twenty years. I mean, to say they’re jaded is an understatement, and to say they’ve seen it all is just true. So I get to thinking, and I talk to a very close friend of mine about it, and she actually said, “Really? You’re really gonna put this out?” And I was like, yeah. I mean, maybe we’ll have a disclaimer, but the interview with Marie and Mark is really good beforehand. She really sets it up. And then the more I think about it, as I’m trying to sort of explain it to her, I’m thinking, wait a second. [...] These are way bigger issues, and this is way bigger than hey, and here’s scene four in *Rough Sex I*. So I go to Steven Hirsch, who’s the head of Vivid, and I explain the situation to him, and I

say, “I think I want this scene back. Can I have the scene? Can I buy the scene back?”

And he says, “OK. Sure. Just shoot me another scene for the movie” – which we do.

[...] So now I’m making a documentary called *Marie Has a Fantasy*, and it’s based entirely around creating this scene, the aftermath of creating the scene, and what it means to put a scene like this – which represents a real woman’s fantasy, but also represents a white man raping a black woman – out into the world.⁴⁹

So, while Taormino remains cognizant of the impact of putting particular kinds of content “out into the world,” she nonetheless refuses to censor her performers’ fantasies. Part of what had motivated her to shoot the scene with Marie Luv in the first place was the fact that so many people – primarily male producers and directors – had already “censored and shamed” Luv for her rape fantasy. Yet she found herself facing a conflict between the desire to depict “a real woman’s fantasy” and to avoid reproducing an image of “a white man raping a black woman,” in the context of America’s problematic history of race relations. As Mireille Miller-Young pointed out during an appearance by Taormino at the University of California, Santa Barbara, it only added to the racially charged atmosphere of the scene that its setting was a vintage diner – the type of place where much of the early Civil Rights Movement was enacted.⁵⁰ In the end, Taormino felt too uncomfortable with the idea of replicating the history of colonization of black women’s bodies by white men in America, and chose to pull the scene. Significantly, though, she bought the scene back not to dispose of it, but to release it in a different context: that of a documentary, rather than adult video.⁵¹ The change of medium presumably will allow her to engage the “bigger issues” in greater depth and with more complexity.

Taormino ultimately seems to suggest that it is not what is depicted in porn that is important but rather how it is depicted, and also how the scenes were produced. Production

practices are important, and Taormino is always quick to emphasize the importance of fair and ethical treatment of performers. In the story above, for instance, Taormino is sure to point out that Luv had dictated the parameters of the scene that would be enacted and had the opportunity to choose the performer with whom she worked, ultimately choosing someone whom she “really, really trusts.” But beyond that – in her own porn, at least – she seems to believe that even the most controversial sex acts and power dynamics can be framed as feminist if they are adequately contextualized and if performers’ (women in particular) consent and desires are made “immensely clear.”

Taormino had made her first film, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, for Evil Angel in 1999, and then returned to porn production in 2005 after a brief hiatus. “Finally we had established this category called ‘Porn for Women,’”⁵² she explains. All of the major studios had begun to copy Candida Royalle’s model to capitalize on the growing couples market, but their notion of couples porn was based on an idea that had been generated in the 1980s and ignored the wide variety of women’s desires. Taormino knew that “women wanted something else.”⁵³ So she created Smart Ass Productions, and with *House of Ass* (2005) and *Chemistry vol. 1* (2006), Taormino made her first attempts to address the industry’s blind spots with regard to (straight) women’s desires, and used the strategy of contextualization to great effect, as a way to frame the “real” sex that porn stars choose to have when given the chance.

Supposedly unstaged porn had been around for decades, but in these films Taormino took this idea a step further, choosing to employ – explicitly and self-consciously – the conventions of reality TV. In so doing, as she makes clear in the voiceovers that begin each film, she attempts to depict “real,” authentic sexual encounters between porn stars. It becomes increasingly evident as the films progress, however, that she is not depicting truly spontaneous sex (as performers

make offhand references to schedules and plans), but she nonetheless unearths something “real” about US cultural attitudes regarding sex and pornography, as stars discuss everything from their choice to come out (or not) as such to their families, to their personal (versus their constructed) identities and desires, to the assumptions that fans make about them. The films were successful enough that Vivid Video signed Taormino on as a contracted director, a highly coveted position, for the *Chemistry* series and several subsequent series of adult videos. In giving the performers a seemingly genuine voice, the *Chemistry* films in particular also expose various cultural truths, about racial and gendered relations, sex and sexuality, and the politics of the industry in which the films are produced.

Why would a director of adult video choose to borrow from the conventions of reality TV in order to do so? Cinematic pornography has, as Linda Williams suggests, concerned itself with proving its own authenticity since its inception.⁵⁴ At least initially, reality TV seemed equally invested in the idea of authenticity, in attempting to depict “the real world.” Most reality programming, however, does no such thing; a closer look at reality TV reveals its patently “false settings [and] contrived situations,” and we should not make the mistake of assuming that its audience is not happily aware of this.⁵⁵ Although the genre has arguably been around at least since the 1972 televising of *An American Family*, MTV’s *The Real World* is generally credited with having ushered in the era marked by its current incarnation. The genre has progressed quite a bit since, and has become increasingly self-conscious, a fact that is not lost on its fans. As Jeffrey Sconce puts it, the “‘reality’ in reality TV is merely one of many fluid plot conventions and not an inviolable foundation.”⁵⁶

Taormino has explicitly modeled *House of Ass* and the *Chemistry* series after MTV’s ongoing reality series *The Real World*, first aired in 1992. Her voiceover in *Chemistry vol. 1*

spells this out for anyone who may have missed the connection by directly evoking the *The Real World*'s opening credits sequence: "This is the true story of seven porn stars . . ." As such, it is worth reviewing the series' conventions and claims for social relevance. Jon Kraszewski, in "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*," explains,

Within the very first minutes of its premiere, MTV's *The Real World* announced that race would be one of the show's most prominent cultural concerns . . . Although not scripted, the show actively constructs what reality and racism are for its audience through a variety of production practices.⁵⁷

These practices include, but are not limited to, the producers' casting decisions, choices regarding where and what to film, and the construction of narrative storylines through editing.

In the first season of *The Real World*, the producers chose to put the "seven strangers" in a New York City loft and to focus largely on the budding friendship between white yokel Julie from rural Alabama and black professional rapper Heather, who had already been living in NYC prior to the show's casting. Kraszewski argues that it is important that Julie is from a rural area rather than, say, New York City, and that "by using discourses about the rural United States and conservatism to construct racism as a problem of individual opinions, the show as well as channel overlook the systemic nature of racism and the way it operates in liberal urban environments."⁵⁸ The discourse of liberalism that informs the show enables it to pat itself on the back for its willingness to deal with the inflammatory subject of race relations in the US, even as it does not so much examine the issue as naively equate urbanity with an enlightened perspective. The show essentially suggests that racism can be solved if roommates can challenge the prejudices of rural conservatives and make them aware of their own ignorance. Of course

this constitutes only one step along the way to an individual's awareness of and resistance to his or her own internalized prejudices, let alone a solution to the widespread, pervasive, systemic, institutionally encoded, and often relatively subtle racism that operates continually in the US; for *The Real World*, however, it's enough.

The show certainly makes its claims for the depiction of "reality," but for my purposes, it is not so much any given show's level of self-consciousness (or lack thereof) that matters, as it is a general cultural recognition of the machinations behind reality TV programming. For instance, as Jeff Sconce argues, "When the 'news' broke that producers of *Survivor* had staged certain events more than once . . . the public could have cared less."⁵⁹ In other words, whether or not individual producers realize it, audiences have become increasingly cynical, and increasingly aware of the highly manipulated nature of reality TV. The pleasures to be derived from viewing reality TV have less to do with the belief that one is experiencing unmediated reality than with the joys of submitting to generic conventions; "the promise of the real on these programs (or in these people) – however distant, strained, and artificial – enables forms of textual play like those unique to any genre."⁶⁰

Taormino, a feminist and highly media literate columnist for the *Village Voice*, seemingly paradoxically utilizes conventions that at once signal "reality" and acknowledge the quotes around it. Perhaps because she is a rare example of a politically motivated feminist filmmaker working in a mainstream context, for one of the industry's largest and most well respected studios, she needs to take advantage of the multi-layered rhetoric enabled by the conventions of reality TV in order to reconcile the corporate, industrial, and generic imperatives of pornography with her personal politics. In *House of Ass* and *Chemistry Vol. 1* Taormino claims to depict "real" sex, that is, the sex porn stars have when the cameras *aren't* rolling. And yet the cameras

unmistakably are rolling, and various aspects of the texts and extratextual materials, like DVD covers, bonus footage, and deleted scenes, openly belie these claims for authenticity.⁶¹ Feminist and queer porn produced outside of the mainstream can afford to be more openly feminist, by sidestepping mainstream distributors – the industry’s gatekeepers – and most mainstream porn is entirely disinterested in conveying feminist ideals. The polyvalent discourse of Taormino’s reality porn, however, allows for her films at once to criticize the porn genre’s obsession with the “real,” and to participate in this obsession.

Furthermore, this discourse allows for a manifestly critical reflection on the politics of racialized and sexualized representation in a notoriously uncritical, unreflective genre. Of course there are many examples of blatantly campy porn, in which the actors and filmmakers are clearly aware of the ridiculousness of their narratives and the implausibility of their dialogue. Constance Penley argues in “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn” that most pornography involves a fair amount of humor, and certainly this humor is often directed towards itself.⁶²

Deep Throat (1972), for instance, seems often to be laughing at itself, and most of the output from the overtly feminist Good Vibrations Productions is playfully absurd, with its silly, punning dialogue and patently ridiculous plotlines. Genuine critical reflection, however, is decidedly rare and, for the most part, avoided at all costs – mainstream porn typically does not want its viewers to engage in the sort of mental exercise that could inhibit the desired physical responses.

House of Ass and, to a far greater extent, *Chemistry* therefore stand out as examples of porn that was created in a mainstream production culture, and yet is clearly designed to elicit both a physical and an intellectual response. The films’ critical arousal is enabled by the conventions of reality TV. In both the shows and the marketing thereof, programs like *The Real World* portray themselves as both unabashedly sensationalistic entertainment, in their focus on

altercations and fornication among cast members; and a liberal venue for the examination of racial and sexual politics in US society, in their choice to bring together people of varying sexualities and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Taormino seems to have followed in these shows' footsteps in creating adult videos that flagrantly appeal to viewers' prurient interest, even as they appear to open up a self-reflexive space for the investigation of racial and sexual representation in mainstream pornographic cinema.⁶³

With *House of Ass* we get a taste of the drama and discord that we have come to expect from shows like *The Real World*, but it seems strangely out of place in a porno movie – and perhaps that is the point, to the extent that it jars viewers out of their escapist reveries, if these films are designed to elicit reflection as well as titillation. The one moment of actual “drama” occurs offscreen. Apparently two of the cast members, a real-life couple, have had a falling out over the fact that she (Jezebelle) would not give him (Justin) a blowjob, and have left early in the morning before anyone else had gotten out of bed. Justin has left a note for Tristan, apologizing and explaining that his relationship with Jezebelle had “reached an impasse.” It seems an odd drama to manufacture, if indeed she did, since none of the remaining cast members particularly cares that they have left.

Other discord enters the film in the form of a particular performer's grating personality: Scott Nails repeatedly makes misogynistic and gynophobic remarks. Although some porn scenarios may involve rape fantasies or coercion, pornography generally strives to create a fantasy world in which women (and men) always eagerly say yes to sex, and subsequently experience sexual pleasure easily, vocally, and on cue. Performers inevitably enjoy, without hesitation, everything from facials to gagging blowjobs. Thus, Scott Nails's declaration at the start of the video that “eating pussy is a waste of time” comes as a bit of a shock.

If porn succeeds to arouse insofar as it can depict sex acts as either naughty and taboo, or easy and free and without consequences, or both, then to include scenes in which the performers question or critique sex acts is a curious strategy indeed. In a sense, by including performers questioning and commenting on sex acts (and the porn industry at large) – rather than simply depicting said acts or taking their value for granted – Taormino situates the sex scenes within a pedagogical context. The confessionals, as will be discussed below, have much to teach us about the politics of the porn industry and the subject positions of the performers.

They also reflect a long-standing preoccupation with the pedagogical potential of pornography. Most of the films that Taormino has made since the *Chemistry* series have been overtly instructional videos, in which she teaches viewers how to safely and comfortably engage in various sex acts and practices, including everything from anal sex to pegging⁶⁴ to rough sex.⁶⁵ Indeed, Vivid created a new division – Vivid Ed – specifically for her to make this sort of film. And before directing her first porno movie, Taormino had published a how-to book titled *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*. An anal sex aficionada, Taormino's entrée into the porn industry came when she decided to direct the video version of the book in 1999, and approached mainstream porn production companies in hopes of finding a financier for the project. Upon hearing the words "instructional" and "for women," each studio immediately turned her down. So too initially did John "Buttman" Stagliano, the legendary porn director credited for originating the gonzo subgenre and known for having a bit of a butt fetish.⁶⁶

Apparently Buttman had a change of heart, however, and for reasons unclear, decided to produce *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, and to concede to a number of Taormino's demands. He allowed that there be no facials and that all of the men – save one, whose scene was with his long-term real-life lover – wear condoms. The latter constituted a rather large

concession for Stagliano, who had been notorious for insisting that he would “never, ever make a picture with a single condom.”⁶⁷ Taormino, in turn, had to allow the scenes to end with a money shot, whereas she would have preferred to forgo this overused convention. This experience has informed all of her subsequent projects; she remains uncompromising about certain issues. Taormino explains, with regard to her theory of feminist porn, solidified during the making of *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, that she believes “it is possible to create sexual images without stripping away someone’s entire identity.”⁶⁸ In her films, she wants to acknowledge and convey performers’ subjectivities, allowing them to enact and express what they find to be a comfort or a turn-on – whether that be internal ejaculation, more time spent on cunnilingus, condom use, or anything else that may or may not defy porn conventions.

This refusal to compromise her ethics, despite a willingness to compromise with regard to her personal preferences in order to remain working in the mainstream, is doubtless the motivating force behind her use of the reality TV convention of the “confessional” in both *House of Ass* and *Chemistry*. Yet the differences in its usage in each of these films reveals much about shifts in industry practice and the increasing presence of feminist ideals. Whereas *Chemistry* would employ this strategy in such a way as to genuinely convey something of the subjectivity of each of the performers, *House of Ass* uses it inconsistently, superficially, and – for the most part – incoherently. For instance, the confessional is the format through which Taormino examines the phenomenon that is prominently emblazoned on the front cover of the DVD and reiterated on the back: “Joanna Angel’s first interracial scene!”

Angel, who is white, neglects to problematize the fact that in her first scene she is made to have sex with the (white) man who deemed “eating pussy [...] a waste of time,” but she hesitates in coupling with Mr. Marcus, a black man with a reputation for being an attentive and

generous lover.⁶⁹ In the confessional in which she talks about her scene with Mr. Marcus, she describes how she had responded to a questionnaire (apparently conducted verbally by a member of the video's crew prior to filming) by saying that she does anal, she swallows (semen), but she does not do interracial scenes. She explains: "I don't want to do anything on camera that I haven't already done in my real life first, because I think it would look really weird, or something . . . Does that make me racist? That I would let some white stranger cum all over my face, but not a black one?" This is a subtly complex and contradictory statement, part of a larger discourse – the confessional – that operates in a variety of ways in this film.

The auto-pornographic mode of the confessional tends to operate in sexperimental film and pornography alike as a form of personalization, conveying the filmmaker's subjectivity and sexuality through the filmmaker's insertion of her own sexualized body into her work, and in the case of mainstream porn, also through marketing rhetoric suggesting that a director's "authentic" fantasies are enacted therein. Here, the confessional primarily conveys the performers' subjectivity instead of the director's, and thus functions similarly to its reality TV counterparts, in providing a certain voyeuristic pleasure to the audience distinct from that derived from merely observing the cast's behavior; the confessional allows us to feel as though we know or understand the motivations *behind* a person's behavior. Following Michel Foucault's theorization of the importance of the confession in society's obsession with understanding sexuality (both one's own and others', as well as one's own through others'), the confessional in *House of Ass* mimics the sort of confession procured through scientific – if not religious – inquiry.⁷⁰ Taormino functions as a (largely absent) Alfred Kinsey drawing from her cast their descriptions of and feelings about their sexual interactions with one another.

Angel's statements in this particular confessional are decidedly problematic, not least because they unwittingly serve to objectify Mr. Marcus. Certainly there is a considerable disparity between acknowledging difference and equating a person – indeed, an entire race of persons – with a sex act (i.e. she'll do anal but she hesitates to “do interracial,” thus a black man becomes a thing that she may or may not decide to do). But at the same time, Angel raises this idea precisely to question it, and it must be said that the industry had established these categories, and she was merely responding to them. So the discomfort that may be provoked by statements like Angel's can be seen as politically productive: the confessional constitutes the first step in engaged, self-conscious, feminist porn production by asking porn performers to reflect upon what they will be doing and by attempting to open up a dialogue about issues like race in the porn industry.

This type of dialogue becomes more complex, and arguably more successful, in *Chemistry vol. 1*. Indeed, Angel's confessional in *House of Ass* seems to be setting us up for the premise of the *Chemistry* series, namely that Taormino is giving us something different – hotter, because more genuine or “real” – from the average porno film. She presents sex scenes involving people who seem actually to want to be having sex with one another, people who have *chemistry*. In this regard, Joanna Angel's confessional conveys a discourse of choice and authenticity. Angel differentiates between sex in “real life” and sex on camera, yet at the same time she collapses the difference by implying that she must actually want to perform the particular acts with a particular (kind of) person – in other words, that she would be unable to perform or enact something that she does not actually want to do and has not already done in “real life.” If porn has, as Linda Williams and others have argued, always been obsessed with proving its own authenticity, then Angel is, knowingly or otherwise, bolstering this video's

claims for the real. Here she insists that she initially hesitated to do something that she had not already done in “real life,” thereby distinguishing between acting and reality, but only through insisting on the reality behind the acting (after all, if it was only acting, there would presumably be no need to hesitate); and that she had changed her mind because she has *real* chemistry with this man. The politically radical ideas can be slipped in precisely because they’re depicted as a type of manufactured drama, in the reality TV format; that is, as something not to be taken too seriously. Beyond that, by encouraging performers to delineate their desires in addition to their politics and other aspects of their subjectivity during the confessionals, Taormino generates critical arousal in her reality porn.

At the same time, by including this confession by Angel, as well as similar ones by other performers, Taormino implies that, unlike most porn, in which actors must couple with whomever they are directed to, and must then feign interest in one another, in *House of Ass* the performers get to choose with whom they couple, and the pleasure derived from their coupling is thus, by implication, real. In fact, while it may be true that Taormino is more overtly politicized in her impetus for endowing performers with so much agency, it is a widespread practice for filmmakers working for mainstream studios to allow female performers to choose with whom they will be performing, and many of the women filmmakers to whom I’ve spoken, at least, insist that they allow performers to have whatever kind of sex they desire. Taormino, however, makes these common production practices evident to viewers in the diegesis of her films. Discourses of choice and authentic desire run throughout *House of Ass* and the *Chemistry* series, in Taormino’s highlighting of the decision to give the performers cameras with which to film one another, in her assertion that the performers are doing what they want when and with whom they want to, and most directly in the confessionals.

In terms of the racialized discourse of Angel's confessional – the explicit focus of her statements – it is doubtless important to bring to light, as her confessional does, the sort of prejudices that operate in the mainstream adult video industry and seriously impact casting decisions, among other things. Mireille Miller-Young writes about the systemic inequalities that lead to black performers being valued and paid less than white performers: “women of color are specifically devalued within a tiered system of racialized erotic capital. Within this hierarchy, black bodies are some of the most degraded.”⁷¹ *House of Ass* does not, however, go beyond this acknowledgement to challenge what I would call, following Stuart Hall, the inferential racism⁷² inherent in Angel's statement and in the idea that runs unchecked throughout *House of Ass* and the mainstream industry at large, that only sex between a black person and a white person should be described as “interracial.” For the purposes of mainstream heterosexual porn there are men, and then there are black men.⁷³

This idea is exploited unselfconsciously on the film's DVD cover, emblazoned with “Joanna Angel's First Interracial Scene!” The marketing decision to capitalize on this sort of sensationalism – a sensationalizing of racialized sexuality that the inclusion of Angel's remarks seems designed to question – is mystifying, unless it constitutes the sort of concession that Taormino had to make to Stagliano in allowing all of the scenes in *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* to culminate in money shots. Regardless, for most viewers, the framing of the issue on the DVD cover provides the context in which Angel's remarks will be taken. Even if the context created thereby were not so luridly exploitative of racial difference, any true examination of racial politics in adult video would have to move beyond the discourse that merely recognizes the existence of them.

Linda Williams, in “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” argues that interracial couplings – particularly those between black and white partners – in pornography are imbued with an “erotic tension,” informed by largely outmoded cultural taboos.⁷⁴ A genre founded on the transgression of cultural proprietary norms, “eroticism in pornography . . . depends on the continued awareness of the taboo.”⁷⁵ Whereas the majority of sexual acts in contemporary mainstream pornography have become rote, interracial sex is still framed as the violation of a taboo, which, Williams argues, allows for a fear or tension that can intensify the viewer’s arousal. Williams discusses this phenomenon exclusively in regard to texts that in some way acknowledge and exploit the taboo. *House of Ass* does not constitute an exception to this industry standard but, as will be elaborated below, *Chemistry* – by both interrogating the taboo and refusing to use it to titillate – does.

There is a disconnect between *House of Ass*’s rhetoric about itself – the rhetoric of choice, inclusion, authenticity – and what it actually shows, as will be illuminated through comparison with *Chemistry, Vol. 1*. That *Chemistry* is decidedly more politically rigorous than *House of Ass* indicates that Taormino had achieved a level of success by 2006 that would enable her to make the kind of politically motivated pornography that she had previously only talked about.⁷⁶ Even before watching the videos, the DVD packaging illustrates the differences in tone: whereas the DVD cover art for *House of Ass* is blatantly exploitative – on the front, three of the women bend over and bare their asses for the camera, and the back features the line, “see what happens when people stop getting polite, and start getting naked” – the front cover for *Chemistry*’s DVD depicts the cast clothed and cuddled up together, and includes the subtitle “an experiment.” Although the film’s style is quite conventional, this focus on experimentation constitutes a link to the investments of sexperimental porn. Here, the experimenting manifests in

the film's overall conceit rather than its form, but as with the sexperimental films covered in Chapter 1, *Chemistry* employs the concept of experimentation in order to convey feminist ideals.

In an article for *Salon*, Soraya Chemaly writes that “non-idealized female bodies used autonomously undermine a continuous narrative about body-based sex and race differences.”⁷⁷ Indeed, as Miller-Young suggests, in mainstream pornography, different values are attributed to different types of racialized bodies. Jessica Drake similarly acknowledges that fat women are typically paid less than thin women (though she adds that, for her own films, she refuses to replicate such pay disparities).⁷⁸ As such, the sexualized depiction of non-idealized female bodies certainly can be politically productive, and one aspect of Taormino's “experiments” has, from the beginning, been a dedication to realistic depictions of women's sexualities. The performers in *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, *House of Ass*, and the *Chemistry* series are all conventionally attractive and slender, but her films demonstrate a commitment to racial diversity and a resistance to racial fetishizing. Miller-Young uses the term “illicit eroticism” to conceptualize “how black women sex workers employ their mythic racialized hypersexuality in the sexual economy,”⁷⁹ much as Celine Parreñas Shimizu uses the term “politically productive perversity” to describe Asian/American performers, filmmakers, and consumers “identifying with ‘bad’ images.”⁸⁰ In Taormino's films, through the confessionals and the general resistance to racial stereotyping, performers like Marie Luv and Mika Tan – who may well “employ their mythic racialized hypersexuality” at other points in their careers – mobilize their gendered and racialized subjectivities as aspects of their individuality.

Unlike Miller-Young and Shimizu, however, Chemaly does not seem to believe that pornography can open up a space for this type of cultural production or counter-identification. She goes on to argue that “billion-dollar ‘good girls gone wild’ industries and an Internet fueled

by gonzo porn, [are] both carefully packaged pseudo-transgressions [that] have little to do with women's autonomy and do nothing to undermine a well-entrenched, misogynistic status quo."⁸¹ *Chemistry*, and even more so the radically inclusive (of a wide variety of body types and gender expressions, as well as racial identities) work of Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble, and other queer porn filmmakers, belie the assumption that porn – and even the much-reviled gonzo subgenre – cannot be political, cannot promote women's sexual autonomy, cannot challenge the status quo.

Many feminist critics of the porn industry argue that violence constitutes an “explicit or implicit theme in pornography,”⁸² and that women in pornography are depicted as passive sex objects. One could argue, however, as many feminist pornographers do, that the problem with most “straight” porn is not what it shows, but rather what it so often does *not* show – a range of body types and sizes, genders, races, and sexualities; a genuine focus on female pleasure or subjectivity; the preparation (such as the application of artificial lubricant) that generally precedes penetrative sex, and anal sex in particular; the use of sex toys, like vibrators, during penetration in order for women to achieve orgasm; the penetration of men by women or other men; and so on. It is not an overstatement to suggest that *Chemistry* comprises the first example of a mainstream American adult video that – to varying degrees – does show all of these things.

The first indication we get that this is not a typical porno film comes when the Filipina-American performer Mika Tan explains of the cast that, “we’ve got a submissive, a pretty boy diva, and [smiling and gesturing to herself] we’ve got a psychotic, loquacious person who just can’t shut up!” I think it’s fair to say that, of all the things most people might expect to come out of a performer’s mouth in mainstream adult video, “loquacious” is not one of them. The surprise is surely magnified when, in the second sex scene, we see Mika strap on a dildo to anally

penetrate white porn star Kurt Lockwood. Of course this image of pegging does not constitute a first for pornography; Carol Queen, Ph.D., led that charge in 1999 with *Bend Over Boyfriend*. That, however, was an instructional video produced by Good Vibrations Productions, an independent and overtly feminist company. It specifically focuses on women anally penetrating men, and the performers were not so much porn stars as amateur, middle-aged intellectuals. *Chemistry*, on the other hand, is a mainstream adult video released by one of the industry's major studios, Vivid Video, and features some of the industry's most bankable stars. Furthermore, it is not an isolated occurrence in the text; images of Tan penetrating Lockwood appear throughout the movie, in various positions, and twice as extended sex scenes. This is also notable in its reversal of traditional racial as well as gendered power dynamics. As numerous critics and academics, including Celine Parreñas Shimizu, have commented on the tendency in porn to portray Asian/American women stereotypically as submissive and subservient (or, more rarely, as cruel and dangerous dragon ladies), this scene proves all the more revolutionary by virtue of the fact that it involves an Asian/American woman consensually penetrating a white man.

In order to understand why the idea of a man being penetrated remains taboo, we must first consider how one result of attempts (by anti-porn feminists and conservative ideologues alike) to regulate obscenity has been that certain types of sex acts have been pathologized, and how homophobia emerges from industry production criteria that understand genre through types of sex acts and the gender and racial identities of sex partners. The community standards clause, established as a primary basis of current obscenity law in *Miller v. California* (413 U.S. 15), complicates matters, because what is considered acceptable to community standards in Los Angeles may well not be considered so in the rural Deep South. This has affected distribution practices for the industry, by preventing the distribution of certain kinds of films (with more

“extreme” content, including kink, or certain kinds of themes, like incest) to certain places and encouraging the production of several different cuts of the same film for different markets, but it has also meant that certain things are simply not done, as a way to avoid obscenity charges. One depiction that has historically been avoided is the combination of BDSM and penetrative sex.

So the taboo against including sex and (even consensual) violence together in porn has pushed the BDSM community and BDSM practices further into the margins, and also has enabled the censorship of common lesbian sexual practices like fisting. Nan Kinney explains that, back in the ‘80s, when she was working on *Shadows*, fisting was “the first thing we wanted to capture,” but,

that was one of the things that was against the law for the distributors, that you could get into trouble for shipping out to certain states. So we had to be really careful. I think it was Georgia, most of the Southeast... If we had gotten caught shipping that there, we could have had jail time and fines. But we felt so strongly about it that we did it.⁸³

So anyone who wanted to include images of this common lesbian sexual practice had to essentially adopt an outlaw status and risk fines or imprisonment. In most cases, directors or producers took the safer route and avoided those images altogether. Courtney Trouble explains that this censorship is ongoing:

I really like fisting, both personally and professionally. [...] It’s really special and intimate and sacred, for me anyways, and for some reason, I can’t show it on DVDs at all. And a lot of VOD companies, I can’t show it. So [...] I have this website that I just started a year ago, called QueerPorn.tv, and [for] that project I’m really pushing my own boundaries and inviting the performers to really push themselves to do that kind of stuff,

like queer kink, like that really intimate, raw stuff that I can't necessarily put on a DVD, so I put it on the Internet.⁸⁴

In this way, the regulation that was supposedly designed to protect people from the dangers of porn's influences has ironically enabled the marginalization of non-normative sex practices. The Internet has, thus far, provided a less restrictive environment for porn distribution, but as Trouble suggests, certain VOD companies nonetheless remain concerned about the possibility of incurring obscenity charges, and credit card companies and advertisers can also place restrictions on certain kinds of content through the practice of billing rejection, or refusing to allow charges to go through.⁸⁵

Perhaps the last major taboo that mainstream heterosexual porn is unwilling to transgress is that of male-on-male sex. Girl-on-girl is standard in any "straight" porn; regardless of how they identify in their personal lives, nearly all women are bisexual onscreen.⁸⁶ The only mainstream heterosexual adult video to involve a male/male scene was *The Zone* (aka *Sex Zone*, 1997). The director, Paul Thomas, "got a very bad reaction" to the movie, on the part of the industry and critics alike; it is unclear whether the reaction among viewers was generally negative as well.⁸⁷ In *Chemistry*, when Tan suggests that she would like to penetrate (an unwilling) Jack Lawrence as well, Mr. Marcus – presently in possession of the "perv cam"⁸⁸ – says uncomfortably that he "would definitely put the camera down at that point."

For his part, Lockwood is perfectly comfortable with enjoying being penetrated, and explains in a confessional that this does not make him gay, as any scene between a man and a woman – regardless of the sex acts they perform – is straight. Although I would argue that such a scene can also be read as queer, Lockwood nonetheless may self-identify however he so chooses and this iteration of his sexuality serves a useful pedagogical purpose in this film. That

it is so important for him to declare his heterosexuality is indicative of the fact that, as he puts it, “the industry has been shooting the same shit for 20 years.” Industry definitions of sexuality (gay porn versus the rest of porn) and gender (masculinity as impenetrable) run up against populations whose gender and sexual identities are far more fluid, and this penetration of a man by a woman – regardless of how vehemently he feels the need to insist that it does not make him gay (and, of course, it does not) – constitutes a step along the way to a genuine challenge to the established norms of mainstream pornography. The very inclusion of two other male performers’ stated discomfort toward the act, along with Lockwood’s defense of it, opens up a broader dialogue about the infinite varieties of sexual preferences and identifications.

The inclusion of pegging in this film, and the confessionals’ general tendency to deconstruct the fantasies and conventions so frequently reiterated in mainstream porn as well as industry practices, exemplify its post-porn tendencies. “Post-porn modernism” is a concept originated by Annie Sprinkle in 1988 to describe film and other art that “has a critical sensibility and while it usually contains some hard-core sex, it is not focused on being ‘erotic.’”⁸⁹ She used the term *Post Porn Modernist* as the title of her one-woman theater piece, and later as the title of an autobiographical book. The pornographic films that she directed after *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981) – *Rites of Passion* (1987), *Sluts and Goddesses* (1992), *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992, and the first adult film to include an FTM trans performer), *Annie Sprinkle’s Herstory of Porn* (1999), *Annie Sprinkle’s Amazing World of Orgasm* (2007) – can all be described as examples of post-porn modernism. Sprinkle says that these films

were never made to be erotic. And people think they’re not successful because they’re not necessarily erotic. [...] It was a deconstruction, or about sex but not meant to turn people on. Same with my theater pieces – you know, when I was showing my cervix,

people think, “Oh, she must be some exhibitionist,” but it wasn’t at all about turning people on. You know, or people say, “oh well, that wasn’t sexy.” Well it wasn’t meant to be.

Sprinkle does not specifically say that eroticism and the deconstruction thereof are mutually exclusive within the same text, but she does distinguish between the straight pornography that she made with the intention to “turn people on” and the more critical deconstructive work that, although it may involve explicit sex, does not aim to titillate.

The Spanish queer theorist Beatriz Preciado adapted the term “post-pornography” in 2002 to refer to

a series of performances, audiovisual representations and practices, activist interventions and texts which, inspired by the work of Annie Sprinkle, de-center the dominant pornographic gaze, question the normative representation codes of pornography and create new spaces for the production of feminist and queer bodies and pleasures.⁹⁰

As Virginie Despentes explains in a voiceover for her documentary *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism*, “Post-pornography undermines the castrating filters that define virility: a man does not touch the cock of another man, and his anus should always remain locked.”⁹¹ The inclusion of pegging in *Chemistry* – that is, the unlocking of Lockwood’s anus – thus performs the same sort of denaturalization and deconstruction of traditional masculinity that can be found in post-pornography. The influence of Sprinkle’s post-porn modernist sensibilities is evident in much of the more recent feminist and queer porn, which tend to question normative representational codes with regard to gender, sexuality, and race, and certainly “create new spaces for the production of feminist and queer bodies and pleasures.” These texts, unlike Sprinkle’s post-porn

work, however, do employ critical arousal to titillate as well as reframe and deconstruct mainstream conventions.

From the beginning, in *Chemistry Vol. 1*, Taormino insists on porn's potential to be political without inhibiting arousal, and sets the stage for what we are about to experience in a speech worth quoting in its entirety for the way in which it encapsulates so many of the video's themes:

This is the true story of seven porn stars, picked to live in a house for 36 hours and have their lives taped. I know, it sounds like a rip-off of that very first reality show, but it isn't – it's better than that. It's seven porn stars, 36 hours, no script, no schedule, no holds barred. They decide the who, the what, the when, the where of their sex scenes. And then they come in here, into the confessional, and tell you the why. I want them to be themselves. I want them to show us a piece of their sexuality, that's not me getting in there and saying "do these five positions, do it in this place, do it at this time." That's the typical formula; that's not the one I want to follow. It could be chaos, or it could be spontaneity. It could be out of control, or it could be a lot of fun. We kind of don't know until we get there . . . We're gonna get there.

The discourses of choice and authenticity communicated in this speech run throughout the video; the performers are explicitly endowed with subjectivity and framed as exerting spontaneous control over their own scenes and images. After sundown, the crew leaves and the performers are purportedly left entirely to their own devices. As in *House of Ass*, the performers are given a (handheld) "perv cam" with which to film themselves; unlike *House of Ass*, footage derived from the perv cam comprises most of the video. She is also careful to point out that what she is doing is not a "rip off" of *The Real World*, and instead is "better than that." Similarly, her film avoids

“the typical formula.” She thus employs a discourse of exceptionalism to suggest that her film is doing something unique and therefore worthwhile.

There is an implicit discourse of egalitarianism running throughout the text as well, indicated largely through the fact that there is no one cameraperson. Each performer in turn gets to film the other performers doing their scenes. There is no one star and, at least for the purposes of filming, after sundown there is no director. They spontaneously joke around, philosophize about sex and pornography, and engage in dirty talk during improvised scenes in which they film one another and group scenes in which Tristan asks questions for the whole group to answer; and they talk directly to Tristan in the confessionals. This resists sexual objectification, in that the performers convey a remarkable amount of subjectivity. Each is presented as a whole person, making individual choices based on clearly articulated desires.

Whereas in *House of Ass*, like *The Real World*, interracial sex is brought up in such an individualized context as to preclude any genuine analysis, here racism is discussed as endemic to the industry. And, rather than the white performers, Mr. Marcus is asked to communicate his outlook on the issue. Tristan asks him what he thinks of white women who refuse to have sex with black men in porn, and he speaks to this for five minutes straight: “I think they’re missin’ out. [laughs] I think they’re limiting their sexual potential. I think it can actually add to your sexual experience, you know, just going outside your realm of security. And there’s a lot of misconceptions, a lot of myths attached to interracial sex.” He then claims to have attempted to change a number of people’s minds and that even when they did not end up having sex with him, he feels he had “planted the seed of change.” He then gives a brief history of the industry’s attitudes:

I remember when I first got into the business, you know, the only thing they would shoot would be white guys with black girls. I remember cable not wanting any type of interracial . . . There wasn't a market for it . . . But a lot of the younger girls are coming into the industry a lot more open. The urban culture is, you know, a lot more prevalent, and a lot more open-minded . . . Porn is a reflection of society – we're almost ahead of the crew when it comes to [sex].

Marcus appears to ascribe here to the same liberal discourse that informed *The Real World's* approach to race relations: American society is improving and racism is dissipating because people in urban areas are open-minded. He adds to this a positive exceptionalist discourse about the porn industry, when he claims that pornographers and performers are “almost ahead of the crew” with regard to attitudes about sex. Nonetheless, there is quite a bit of insight packed into his extended response, which incorporates a rather sophisticated argument about the industry's relationship to society, the ways in which this much-maligned genre – which, to its critics, appears to change very little over time – in fact reflects and refracts changing societal attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality. As this film, by refusing to fetishize sex involving people of color, constitutes such a radical departure from earlier standards, his remarks are also pointedly reflexive.

In *Chemistry* Marcus has an extended scene with a black woman, Marie Luv, without it being ghettoized or otherwise marked off as “ethnic.” Theirs is the first scene of the video and, as such, our entrée into the world of the movie. The scene is intercut with shots of each of them in the confessional. Marcus describes how he had met Marie when she was just getting into the industry and was still “operating a forklift” in a warehouse, and how lucky he feels that he “got to be a part of her whole sexual awakening.” She admits that she used to cry all the time, when

she was made by others to feel ashamed of her work, but that she now takes pride in it: “Now, can’t nobody make me cry.” She goes on to emphasize how glad she is that Tristan is not making her “look into the camera” and fake it in her sex scenes; as a result, she gets to “enjoy Mr. Marcus,” whom she loves working with, at her own pace. She explains that, unlike her scene with Marcus, in typical porno scenes she does not have enough time to achieve orgasm herself (although of course the men always get off): “Right before I’m about to get mine [...] Someone yells, ‘Stop!’” This is the first of many critiques of porn conventions and practices to appear in the text, and it also contains an implicit claim for authenticity by way of exceptionalism; in this way, the film can criticize problematic tendencies of the porn industry while positioning itself outside of it. Since Marie does not have to fake it, she is able to experience their sex scene as, “kind of like how I would fuck Marcus if he was at home with me.” This, of course, works to bolster the film’s primary conceit, shared with *The Real World* – the idea that viewers are invited to watch how performers behave at home in their real lives, and as an extension of that, *Chemistry* supposedly depicts people having sex on their own terms.

Taormino is heavily invested in this idea throughout her body of work. When she was preparing to film *Tristan Taormino’s Expert Guide to Female Orgasms* (2010), for Vivid Ed, she “talked to a lot of different female performers about how they have orgasms, what makes them come, what doesn’t make them come, the easiest way to make them come, the fastest way to make them come,” and so on.⁹² Her goal in making the film was to show that “there are all these different ways that women can experience pleasure and orgasm.”⁹³ She shared with me an anecdote about how one of her female performers failed to show up, so she had to find a last minute replacement. When the performer arrived at the set, everything “had to happen on the fly”:

So I don't know anything about this woman's sexuality. Nothing. And the first thing she said was, "It's really hard for me to come with a partner, period. And I don't usually come on camera." [...] And I said, "Well, what would it take for you to come?" And she's like, "Well, I take a really long time." And that was actually perfect, because women in real life tell me this all the time. They say, like, "I take too long to come," or "it takes too long" – they have a certain idea of how long it should take, and they feel like they're not living up to it. It's a huge problem in women's ideas around their own sexuality. So I said, [...] "You take 'a long time,'" whatever "a long time" is – let's put that in quotes – and I said, you know, "What do you think would make you come?" And she said, "Not fucking." And I was like, "OK, great!" Because Evan Stone, who she really likes, is actually one of the better performers at cunnilingus. [...] So I'm like, OK, this might actually work. And so what we did was, we shot, in real time, the scene – where we did not break – and about 27 minutes into it, after using his hands, his mouth, and a vibrator, he got her to come. [...] So, obviously on an ordinary day on an ordinary set, the odds are against her that she's gonna come. And the odds are against a lot of women who may need certain kinds of stimulation, a very specific kind of position, to come. You know, there are some women who can only come in one or two positions. And if the director doesn't want to see that position, well, you're screwed. So I think the whole idea is that, I'm gonna make this space that is really safe, really comfortable – we're not on a timeline – and quite frankly, let's use whatever you want to get you there. [...] And by creating that kind of environment, I would say [...] the majority of women on my sets have real orgasms.⁹⁴

Here Taormino again distinguishes herself from most filmmakers in the mainstream industry, who are less concerned with whether or not female performers experience genuine orgasms, so long as they can make it appear as though they have (and in some cases, even that performance of orgasmic pleasure is unnecessary). She refuses to impose a timeline in this instance, and insists on showing what it takes – “his hands, his mouth, a vibrator” – for this performer to achieve an orgasm, not just for the sake of enabling an individual performer to experience pleasure, but also to educate viewers and to correct assumptions about “how long it should take” a woman to climax during sex.

Moments that assert this commitment to authenticity in general, and genuine pleasure in particular, occur throughout *Chemistry, Vol. 1*, and they seem designed to make the viewer feel better about what s/he is watching; they function to preclude a kind of liberal guilt about consuming a product of what is widely considered to be an exploitative industry. First, the “reality” discourse – “they decide the who, the what, the when, the where of their sex scenes” – enables us to believe that we are seeing people have sex the way they *really* want to be having it, and that, rather than being in any way coerced into performing, these people are doing it because they want to. Additionally, the “male audience,”⁹⁵ as it has been constructed by the industry that caters to it and the critics that write about it, gets to maintain the fantasy that women are always ever-ready for sex, because the women keep reasserting their desires thereof.

There are, however, also a number of ways in which the text undermines these sentiments. In one early scene in which Kurt holds the perv cam while talking to a partially-clothed Mika, they indicate through a hand gesture that money is a primary reason for participating in the project; Kurt has, at this point, already mentioned his financial motivations twice. This rather subversive reminder that they are paid performers – that is, that they are not

having sex with each other just because they want to be having sex with each other, but also because they want to get paid for doing so – complicates the film’s primary conceit by acknowledging that what they are doing in the film involves professional performance, and that they are not in fact having sex the way they have it at home (at least in the sense that, one can assume, they would not be paid to perform in their private lives). There are other moments – as when Kurt says to Mika that he “has to work in ten minutes” – that belie Taormino’s claim that they are working without a schedule, and still others – as when Mr. Marcus acknowledges that porn stars are “different . . . sexually different” – that point to the fantasy framework of pornographic representation and act as reminders of the reality that “normal” women are not necessarily voracious sex machines, willing to “fall into bed at the drop of a hat”⁹⁶ with any available man. In this way, many of the representational issues from *House of Ass* are raised and reframed in *Chemistry* to acknowledge that porn does not in fact depict unmediated “reality.”

Gail Dines remarks, in “King Kong and the White Woman: *Hustler* Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity” that in pornography the black man’s “wholeness as a human being is [...] rendered invisible.”⁹⁷ Yet, one might just as easily ask: in pornography, generally speaking, whose “wholeness as a human being” is *not* rendered invisible? Particularly in its mainstream incarnations, it is not a genre that typically seeks to depict well-rounded characters or complex human relations; its primary focus is the interaction of genitalia. And this, finally, is why *Chemistry* proves so remarkable: all of the performers come off as comfortable with themselves and their sexuality, thoughtful and intelligent, and supportive of one another; that is, as whole human beings who are, if hornier than the rest of us, perhaps also less neurotic and more self-aware than most. The convention of the confessional and the distinct claims for authenticity borrowed from reality TV – a genre that at once insists upon its social relevance and

refuses to take itself too seriously – allow for a self-consciously cerebral yet playful examination of racial and sexual politics in the mainstream adult video industry.

As it is, the novelty of the use of these conventions in *Chemistry* has prompted *Adult Video News*, the industry's primary trade publication, to designate it "the purest example ever of high concept reality porn,"⁹⁸ and has enabled the format that includes performers filming and directing themselves – even interlarded as it is with their subjectivity and discussions of racial and sexual politics – to pass unchecked through the industry's old boys' network. The full potential for the borrowing of generic conventions could not be borne out until the economic success of *House of Ass* earned for Taormino the level of creative control demonstrated in *Chemistry*, which has enabled her to create a genuinely feminist, queer, and transgressive text. In a sense (and only in this sense) it can be seen as more queer than most explicitly gay or lesbian or even queer porn, which is ghettoized as such, in that it subverts the expectations of its intended audience and makes no attempt to label or define the sex involving an Asian/American woman penetrating a white man. The average straight man probably is not expecting to watch men being penetrated in a pornographic film marketed as mainstream and heterosexual, and the DVD packaging for *Chemistry, Vol. 1* does not include any warning or even any neutral indication that the video includes such content, so it seems a bit like an ambush – subversive content hidden in a mainstream porno, designed to catch straight men with their pants down, as it were, and to force them to examine their own assumptions.

In the years since *Chemistry, Vol. 1* was released, there has been a veritable explosion in feminist and queer porn production. Taormino suggests that, in comparison to filmmakers like Shine Louise Houston, "the biggest difference between our porn is that she makes queer porn that's sort of by and for queer people, and especially queer women."⁹⁹ The term queer is used in

a variety of ways: as a blanket term to identify lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) communities; to denote non-mainstream sexual groups or communities, which may include straight transvestites, BDSM enthusiasts, and fetishists; to suggest an unsettling or deconstruction of fixed sexual identities, labels, and categories; to oppose the normative tendencies of the mainstream gay and lesbian liberation movement; or simply to indicate resistance to sexual and social norms. As such, queer porn tends to be politicized and to resist the normalizing tendencies of mainstream porn, even of the feminist variety. All of these formulations of “queer” can be detected in the various developments of queer porn which Katrien Jacobs describes collectively as “pride porn” and as a key form of alternative pornographic production distributed among queer networks, increasingly more widely.¹⁰⁰ Since the publication of her article in 2004, queer porn production has proliferated and successfully moved offline and into the realm of DVD production – traditionally, the dividing line between major and minor producers of pornography. As producer Dan O’Connell puts it, “real [porn] studios put out DVDs.”¹⁰¹

Prior to (and throughout) the queer porn revolution online, artists and performers such as Bruce LaBruce, Del LaGrace Volcano, and Barbara de Genevieve have been important in developing notions of queer porn, and queer porn has been associated with the “post-pornographic” challenging of categories that have long been considered distinct or even mutually exclusive – art, porn, erotica, sex, education, and spirituality.¹⁰² For example, the post-porn pioneer Annie Sprinkle has been described by Chris Straayer as exercising “a ‘queer’ ideology” and confounding “pornography’s boundaries.”¹⁰³ More recently still, the success of Buck Angel, “a real man with a real pussy,” who merges the signs of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity and denaturalizes binary gender roles in his porn as both a performer and a director, suggests a

growing visibility for queer pornographies generally.¹⁰⁴ In addition to having a prolific career as a performer, director, trans* advocate, motivational speaker, and educator,¹⁰⁵ Angel achieved mainstream industry recognition as the first female-to-male trans performer to win the AVN Award for Transsexual Performer of the Year in 2007.¹⁰⁶

For several years, queer porn as a subgenre addressing an underserved market was primarily only available online. Filmmakers like Courtney Trouble started their careers as webmistresses. Barbara de Genevieve, whose site, Ssspread.com, operated from 2001 to 2004 as a “prime porn site for hot femmes, studly butches, and lots of gender-fuck,” has argued that queer porn portrays bodies which are “insubordinate, disobedient, unruly,” creates a world where “everything is possible,” and makes “a world of difference” in the depiction of everything “from vanilla sex, to masculinity, to blood sports, to violence.”¹⁰⁷ The coding of sex acts as “play” and as part of a “scene,” in the site’s rhetoric, means that its mimicking (and consequent deconstruction) of heteronormativity – for example, in the fetishization of the penis or the hypersexualization of femme performers – works to queer the acts, while existing sexual categories are confounded. Desires and identities are framed as authentic, while performance is acknowledged as such. Calling attention to the performative aspects of porn production shores up the films’ claims for authenticity by way of comparison, and also reflects an investment in the idea of gender and sexuality as performance. We may see “a male born person identifying as a pre-op female transsexual strap on a dildo and fuck a butch dyke identifying as a trannie-boy in his pussie [*sic*],” or “a trannie-boy who was a butch dyke get fucked in the ass by a gay man.”¹⁰⁸ Either way, as deGenevieve argues, “power dynamics are subverted, inverted and perverted,” and in the process the essence of “who we think we are as gendered beings is called into

question and unmercifully interrogated.”¹⁰⁹ Or, as Pat Califia might have it, queer porn involves “queers doing queer things together!”¹¹⁰

This subversion of gender and sexual categories and commitment to diversity is typical of queer porn. *No Fauxxx* (now subsumed under the *Indie Porn Revolution* collective),¹¹¹ launched in 2003 by Courtney Trouble, similarly features “hot, radical porn made by ladies, artists, and queers,” and embodies many of the queer characteristics outlined by deGenevieve. Its claim to authenticity is made primarily on the basis of its diversity in representing “normal people interested in expressing their sexualities [...] all sizes, all genders, all sexual orientations, all races, and from all sorts of places, doing all sorts of things,” expressed through an equally diverse range of subgenres – “soft core, pin up girls, black and white erotica, sensual shots” – and sexual practices – “masturbation, role-playing, kink, and fetish [...] BDSM, bondage, SM.”¹¹² Thus, its claim to produce “porn that doesn’t fake it!” rests on the replacement of a singular “fake” depiction of sex with a plurality of supposedly authentic expressions.¹¹³

Sex and gender are also presented as plural categories on *No Fauxxx/Indie Porn Revolution*. Trouble insists that the site is “not split into groups based on gender, because there are many models on my site who could never pick just one. Same goes with size, race, orientation. Everything is so fluid, and it all gets lost in the creation-to-consumption translation anyhow – why label it?”¹¹⁴ This latter remark is especially intriguing, implying as it does that viewers impose their own understandings of gender and sexuality onto the images of performers. Along these lines, Trouble told me that they¹¹⁵ also “work under the understanding that people do not watch porn that matches their sexual orientation. (For example, dykes don’t only watch ‘dyke porn’, heterosexuals don’t always watch heterosexual porn, etc.)”¹¹⁶ This is a distinctly queer perspective on porn spectatorship, but it also implies something meaningful about

mainstream porn's marketing imperatives, and the very different goals of queer porn, which does not make the same kinds of assumptions about its audiences. Mainstream porn, that is, is marketed primarily to straight men (and increasingly, to straight couples), regardless of the actual market demographics, but queer porn is made for a diverse and unspecified audience. As Trouble suggested in their keynote address at the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference,

I may own one of the only porn production companies in the world that doubled in gross income in 2013, and I maintain a strict all inclusive casting manifesto that encourages creative performer autonomy over potential profit margin. The thing is, you don't even HAVE to cater to the casual cis male customer. You barely have to get on their radar.

They will find you anyways. And they will watch your porn anyways.¹¹⁷

Here, Trouble acknowledges the potential profitability of addressing the interests of diverse and long-underserved audiences, suggesting that the need to cater to the presumed desires of straight men – long assumed to be the bread and butter of porn consumption – is diminishing in recent years, especially since the “casual cis male customer” will seek out queer or feminist porn if it aligns with his interests. This latter point suggests that audience demographics are far more complex and less segregated than practices of niche marketing would allow.

Since queer porn initially developed online, as I argue in an earlier piece in Feona Attwood's edited volume, *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, it is important to consider how online experiences are constructed and constrained in mainstream porn sites, in order to understand the intervention made by queer porn.¹¹⁸ On mainstream sites, online architecture, visual language, and address often enforce a dominant view of sex and gender identity, producing specific subject positions from which to view and understand the online environment. Key to these processes are forms of categorization that fundamentally delimit the

user's experiences, even as they promote what Zabet Patterson calls "the hallucinatory promise of fluidity."¹¹⁹ Girl-on-girl (as opposed to lesbian-produced) porn is typically grouped with straight porn, while gay male porn and bisexual porn that includes guy-on-guy content are typically segregated from the other categories via a link to a separate page, if not excluded altogether. Videos featuring two women and no men might be listed as "girl-on-girl" or categorized in relation to particular sex acts, such as "oral," but gay male porn is always marked off as "gay."

The choices that webmasters and –mistresses make when organizing the content on their sites thus have significant implications for the ways that the content will be received by users. Zabet Patterson argues that any site that allows users to filter out a type of content (for instance, gay male content or BDSM content),

indicates a technology of desire both productive and regulatory. These buttons do allow for a kind of limited role-playing, but it is one in which the 'exploration' is always already constrained by a logic requiring instantly recognizable cues, cues frighteningly regularized under the dictates of maximum efficiency and maximum profit.¹²⁰

That is, while visitors to a site could use these filters and taxonomies as jumping-off points for exploring types of content that might never have occurred to them otherwise, these technologies always at the same time ultimately constrain our understandings of gender, sexuality, race, and other identity categories. They also tend to marginalize or outright erase couplings and sex acts that don't fit easily into a given category – how would one begin to categorize a film in which "a trannie-boy who was a butch dyke get[s] fucked in the ass by a gay man"?¹²¹

On the porn "tubes" – XTube, PornoTube and YouPorn – major sites of online porn distribution, the user is often presented with a specific choice: to filter out the straight or the gay

content, or to view all content. This latter option seems to offer the patently queer opportunity for the kind of role-playing that Patterson alludes to. In this context, straight-identified men or women could choose to view gay or queer content, yet the fact that the viewer must remove oneself from the “main” site in order to look at gay male content “reproduces the sense that to click the ‘gay button’ is to somehow move away from the norm and become deviant, whether the idea of that is arousing, shame-inducing, or both.”¹²²

In 2010, when I wrote about online LGBTQ porn for *Porn.com*, Tube8, one of the most popular online porn sites to host free content, allowed the viewer to filter out three of its categories – Fetish, Gay, or Shemale – from a possible fifteen – Amateur, Anal, Asian, Blowjob, Ebony, Erotic, Fetish, Gay, Hardcore, Latina, Lesbian, Mature, Shemale, Strip, and Teen. The site has since been redesigned, such that one must choose from one of three categories – Straight, Gay, or Shemale – each of which has its own site with its own subcategories.¹²³ Significantly, the subcategories on the “Straight” site are the same as in the previous model, with the following exceptions: instead of “Gay” or “Shemale,” one can now choose from “Indian” and “HD.” This revised model seems to create even less of a space for exploration; rather than privileging some amount of inclusivity by requiring that a user make the active choice to filter out potentially unwanted content (as in the site’s previous construction), the content is now already separated out for us – we must choose between Straight, Gay, or Shemale in order to begin navigation of the site. Aside from the offensiveness of the term, the “Shemale” category conflates gender identity with sexuality, when in fact users of any sexual identification might be interested in porn featuring male to female trans performers, and the performers themselves might identify as straight, queer, or otherwise.

Additionally, if a user were to perform a search to find “Tube8” or simply type the web address into one’s browser, one would automatically be directed to the “Straight” site, which, though it doubtless reflects the tastes of the majority of the site’s users, nonetheless also reinforces heterosexist assumptions and paradigms. In both constructions of the website, the viewer is denied the option of filtering out lesbian porn; it is subsumed under the category of “Straight.” This has several important implications. While the option for a preference for “all” porn in the site’s earlier model may disrupt the binary opposition of “gay” and “straight”, this method of categorization nonetheless reinforces a particular conception of what it is to be gay. Also, in the site’s latest incarnation, to view “lesbian” content does not involve marking oneself as deviant or Other; in its presumed inoffensiveness to straight men, lesbianism is thus configured as nonexistent as its own identity category. Through this erasure, as in most mainstream porn on DVD, lesbians are shown that “they don’t really exist in the heterosexual cosmos as lesbians.”¹²⁴ Overtly co-opted by the “Straight” world, in the latest version of Tube8’s system of categorization, “Lesbian” is further drained of any sort of political or community-based meaning.

In distinct opposition to this model, *No Fauxxx/Indie Porn Revolution* makes a comprehensive claim to authenticity in its mission statement: “We are creative exhibitionists who want to recreate our roles in the porn industry. We are dirty and honest. We are an inclusive community. We are fucking hot.”¹²⁵ Here, authenticity is asserted on several levels: production (it is made by “queers”), representation (the models are “exhibitionists”), reception (they are “hot”), and social context (the site offers an “inclusive community” and is engaged in recreating roles within porn). In this sense, it can be compared to lesbian/dyke sites such as *The Crash Pad Series* – created by Shine Louise Houston as a follow-up to her successful film from 2005 – and

in the same way differs from both straight and gay mainstream sites in terms of its social and political sensibilities. Despite the many overlaps in terms of content and mission, *No Fauxxx/Indie Porn Revolution* differs from *The Crash Pad* in its inclusion of cis-gendered men. In this respect, *No Fauxxx* was a major innovator.

There is an intentionality to the politics of queer porn that is rarely found within the mainstream industry. Trouble goes so far as to describe their site as “subversive. A piece of the underground community.”¹²⁶ They insisted in an email correspondence from 2008 that the porn at *No Fauxxx* should be read as queer because it:

represents a community of sexual exhibitionists, explorers, and outcasts. It's slightly political in a sex positive or feminist kind of way. The site has models who identify their gender & sexuality as “fag,” “femme,” “trannie,” “grrrl,” “boi,” “butch,” “girl fag,” “whatever,” “i [sic] don't know,” “genderqueer,” and “who cares?”¹²⁷

Performers may choose to define themselves in any number of ways in their individual profiles, but the photo sets and videos themselves are not categorized. The performers also remain unmarked racially; black performers are not defined by their blackness, and Asian/American performers are not exoticized. Indeed, the site eschews categorization altogether – one must sift through the thumbnails for the videos and photo sets in order to choose what to view. This constitutes a radical and distinctly politicized move. By refusing to present users with taxonomies or other systems through which to filter out undesirable content, *No Fauxxx* queers the very process of viewing online porn.

In 2007, Courtney Trouble moved into DVD production with *Speakeasy*. Since then, they have released an additional 17 titles. In the bio on their personal website,

CourtneyTrouble.com, they self-identify as “responsible for coining the term ‘Queer Porn’ as a genre in the mainstream industry.”¹²⁸ Indeed, they have received mainstream recognition – in the form of AVN Award nominations (seven to date) – for their decidedly non-mainstream work, and for this reason it is worth acknowledging not just the distinctions between mainstream and independent (and specifically feminist, queer, and lesbian/dyke) porn but also the overlaps and intersections. In 2009, Trouble released *Seven Minutes in Heaven*, which is described on the DVD cover as the “first ever gonzo queer film.” The film is, however, clearly inspired by Taormino’s *Chemistry* series, as this additional segment from the DVD cover’s description suggests: “The amateur cast picks their own partners, their own sex toys and their own ways of getting off.” Several aspects of the film (and its sequels) distinguish it from Taormino’s series, however, and these distinctions can be instructive in differentiating queer porn from the mainstream.

The film opens with the performers introducing themselves, much like in *Chemistry, Vol. 1*, but in this film, we immediately experience a disruption of gendered expectations when cis-woman Tina Horn (who would later go on to co-create and direct for QueerPorn.tv) describes herself as “a sleazy rock ‘n’ roll faggot.” In one of the first sex scenes, we see a transman sucking a cis-woman’s strap-on cock: a queer scene if ever there was one. A press release from Good Releasing (the distributor of *Seven Minutes in Heaven*) describes Trouble’s production company thusly: “Reel Queer Productions documents authentic, edgy, queer sex and culture featuring established and emerging independent artists and under-represented erotic realities.”¹²⁹ This queer sensibility and dedication to depicting “under-represented erotic realities” ultimately distinguishes this film and other examples of queer porn from even the most radically feminist work made within the mainstream industry.

Seven Minutes in Heaven does not include formal confessionals per se, as we find in the *Chemistry* series, but it does feature a number of sequences in which the performers speak to the camera about their experiences in making the film and/or broader topics related to sex and sexuality. These auto-pornographic segments in which performers apparently control the representation of their own subjectivity, interjected between the more traditionally directed sex scenes, provide a more overtly radical and politicized commentary than do any of the confessionals in *Chemistry, Vol. 1*. Sophia, a black cis-woman performer, tells us, “I think we’re at a really exciting time in history, in terms of [...] political movement building. It’s really important to have [...] authentic images of sexual expression.” This immediately positions the porn itself, and her role within it, as politically motivated and politically necessary: it is part of a “movement” and, more than simply a porno film, it is a venue for “authentic images of sexual expression.”

At the same time, as indicated above, queer, lesbian/dyke, and feminist porn have garnered mainstream recognition – in the form of AVN and XBIZ award nominations – over the years, and the current and on-going popularity (and profitability) of Trouble’s work suggests that the divisions between and among these categories are fluid and shifting. Trouble’s forthcoming mainstream distribution deal with PurePlay Media is a more concrete testament to the blurring of these boundaries.¹³⁰ Lesbian sex has, of course, been embraced by the mainstream for decades, in the form of girl-on-girl content, which quickly emerged as its own subgenre.

Nan Kinney explains how, despite the mainstream’s embrace of girl-on-girl content targeting straight male audiences, when lesbian/dyke-produced porn was in its nascent stages, she and Debi Sundahl were seen distinctly as outsiders to the industry:

When we started going to the Adult Video Awards back in 1982, '83, '84, when they first started, and it was like, talk about *Gorillas in the Mist*. Here we were [...] coming out of San Francisco, absolutely, [the mainstream producers] could not relate to us. We'd go up to them and try to get distributors, show 'em our little movies. "Well, do you have a cum scene in the first three seconds?" We're like, "Well, no." "Well, we can't take it unless you have a cum scene in the first three seconds."¹³¹

In an indication that the industry does change over time, however, lesbian/dyke porn has been recognized by the industry as well, since at least 2001, when Shar Rednour's and Jackie Strano's collaboration, *Hard Love/How to Fuck in High Heels*, was not only nominated for but won the AVN Award for Best All-Girl Feature. Rednour suggests that women like Nina Hartley, who were feminist and queer but working in the mainstream at the time, "appreciated us pushing it, because they couldn't push it and still make a living. But if we pushed it, then they got to follow."¹³² Their work winning an AVN Award was an indication that the limits could in fact be pushed, and arguably that helped to pave the way for Hartley's subsequent feminist filmmaking, as well as Taormino's feminist porn for Vivid Video and Trouble's success in appealing to a wide market.

In the current landscape, the most successful producer of so-called "lesbian" mainstream porn is a cis-gendered, white man, Dan O'Connell. His production company, Girlfriends Films, has garnered countless awards and nominations, and routinely outsells other purveyors of girl-on-girl content – among other things, it has been ranked the #1 studio on HotMovies.com for seven years running.¹³³ His first film, *Lesbians Uncovered: The Naked Truth* (released in 2005), was actually initiated by a woman, whom he met in a UCLA Extension course on documentary filmmaking.¹³⁴ His classmate had begun the film as an attempt to document the realities of

lesbian life. When she didn't have the resources to finish the project, however, O'Connell stepped in and took over. This is revealing of gendered power dynamics in American society, and reflects the larger workings of the mainstream industry, in which men control most of the money, as owners of the largest studios and distribution companies, even when women do manage to achieve a significant measure of creative control. From there, O'Connell decided that there was a niche that was crying out to be filled – namely for girl-on-girl porn featuring women who actually identify as lesbian or bisexual. So his motivations were primarily financial; unlike Trouble, he openly admits to focusing on girl-on-girl content as a way to “make money.”¹³⁵ But there are ethics behind his business model, for which he has created the tagline, “For fine folks with good hearts and curious minds.”

O'Connell's films are marketed primarily to a straight male audience, but he prides himself on the authenticity of his performers' sexual identities and sex acts. As such, although he does not identify as feminist, there are significant overlaps between his production practices and those of overtly feminist pornographers. His camera crew usually consists of women, to make the performers more comfortable; he always pays his performers immediately; he is opposed to coercion, either of performers on set or of characters in his films; and he only hires performers who identify as lesbian or bisexual.¹³⁶ These concerns with authenticity and safety may be more motivated by business strategies than politics, but they nonetheless align quite well with the production practices of feminist pornographers like Taormino, who insists that fair and ethical porn is that in which:

There is absolute consent and no coercion of any kind. The work environment is safe, everyone wants to be there, and respect is essential. 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. The movie is a collaboration between director and performer, with the actors' input and their ideas about how they want to be represented.¹³⁷

Similarly, O'Connell insists that the dialogue is mostly ad-libbed by the performers, who are given a general scenario to work with, and for the sex scenes, he always tells them to have sex however they so choose, because his goal is "to present realistic sex, and the only way you can do it is not to edit anything in or out, or shout in a lot of instructions."¹³⁸ To that end, he shoots the sex scenes essentially in real time, with little to no editing, in order to allow the scene to unfold naturally. Through an appeal to the realist politics of the long take, he claims that his films are more authentic than those of filmmakers like Shine Louise Houston, who apparently told him that she has "edited some scenes to take out some stuff, or make them longer."¹³⁹

One of his films, *Poor Little Shyla* (2010), opens with a scene in which a disabled, young, white woman (Shyla) is sexually assaulted by two female classmates (Faye and Georgia). They take her crutches, tie her arms and legs to the bed, and take turns calling her a "slut" and a "whore" and pulling down her underwear, threatening to check if she is a virgin or indeed one of the identities that they are forcing upon her. After Faye's mother walks in on the scene, however, the remainder of the film focuses on how the girls' actions were wrong, and how their behavior might be corrected (albeit through such absurdities as both Faye's and Georgia's mothers seducing Georgia, supposedly to help her to figure out whether or not she is a lesbian). The sex scenes among the women can best be described as tender, and the performers convey what seems like genuine pleasure. In this film, though, the ableist narratives ultimately belie the underlying differences between the mainstream and queer/feminist porn; the mainstream tends to

exploit stereotypes for the sake of a sexual charge, where queer and feminist porn would critique them.

Loree Erickson, who self-identifies as a “poly, queer, femmegimp porn star academic,” writes in her contribution to *The Feminist Porn Book* about screening her short porn film, *want*, at a festival.¹⁴⁰ During the Q&A following the film, another director told her, “Eventually your chair faded away and you were just a hot girl getting fucked.” She goes on to analyze the implications of this statement:

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.¹⁴¹

Poor Little Shyla replicates this erasure: the first (consensual) sex scene involving Shyla is a dream sequence in which Faye’s mother imagines Shyla without her leg braces and crutches. In making Shyla’s supposedly “less desirable bit disappear,” this scene becomes a visualization of the “you were so hot I forgot you were [disabled]” narrative that offends Erickson. The erasure suggests that a disabled person cannot be desired for who she is as a whole person; it attempts to separate out her disability from her self and thus denies her identity as a person with a disability.

The film’s depiction of disability reflects the liberal humanist tendency, through discourses of relativism, to erase and level differences. In *What Is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe suggests that,

A fundamental problem with the liberal humanist model is not so much what it wants as the price it pays for what it wants: that in its attempt to recognize the uniqueness of the

other, it reinstates the normative model of subjectivity that it insists is the problem in the first place.¹⁴²

In other words, rather than rejecting the dichotomy between normal and not-normal, liberal humanism merely keeps expanding the category of the normal. A film like *Poor Little Shyla* may seem inclusive, in that it does depict a person with a disability as a sexual being who does not deserve to be exploited, but by separating out her disability from herself, it fails to present disability as “something other than merely an expansion of the liberal humanist ethos to ever newer populations.”¹⁴³ Shyla is not allowed to be a different kind of person; she must instead be depicted as “normal” (i.e. able-bodied) in order to be sexualized in the dream sequence.

This is not to say that a person should be reduced to her disability either – on the other end of the spectrum, disabled bodies are fetishized in porn and “paternalistic assumptions hypersexualize and/or portray disabled people as hypervulnerable.”¹⁴⁴ Compounding its representational issues, *Poor Little Shyla* stars an able-bodied performer who essentially puts on “crip-face” for the role of Shyla, and performs hypervulnerability by awkwardly stumbling around in leg braces that she doesn’t actually need, using crutches that are clearly not fitted to her arms, and exaggerating the limitations caused by her “disability” – as when she makes a show of being incapable of bending over to pick up something that she has dropped.

When her classmates trick her into lying down and then tie her to the bed, the film unwittingly evokes the experience of another performer and creator of disability porn, Mia Gimp. Gimp reveals, in an interview conducted by Kevin Heffernan, that her desire to make disability porn arose from her own personal experiences of sex and disability, as well as the general lack of visibility thereof. She explains that, “I use kink as a form of accessibility in the bedroom. I tie my legs down to the bed so I don’t kick my partner in the head.”¹⁴⁵ The

important distinction to make here is, of course, that of consent – in Gimp’s formulation, she is the active agent, using consensual bondage as a way to enable her own sexual accessibility. In *Poor Little Shyla*, though the performer no doubt consented to the bondage, the title character is depicted as a hypervulnerable object, tied up against her will, and onto whom the other characters (and more importantly, the filmmakers and viewers) impose their own desires.

Gimp is the co-creator, with Clark Matthews, of *Krutch*, a short auto-pornographic film that created a major sensation at the Feminist Porn Awards in 2013. In the film, Gimp walks down the streets of New York City, using her crutch, with which she eventually penetrates herself in a bedroom. Before she makes it to the bedroom, however, we see her fall down onto the street. A passerby helps her up and hands her the crutch. On the decision to include the scene in which she falls, Gimp says, “Falling is how I live, period. End of story. I’m not afraid to fall. Falling is how I live every day I walk down the street. [...] I’m constantly falling, so it had to be in the film. It’s a part of me and represents the way I live and function in the world.”¹⁴⁶ Unlike in *Poor Little Shyla*, in which Shyla’s sexuality is removed from her disability through the convention of the dream sequence, in *Krutch*, the experience of falling – which is a simple part of how Gimp lives her life – is resolutely not separated out from her sex life.

The crutch itself functions as a visible rhetorical connection, linking these parts of her life. It is highly significant that the crutch shifts in symbolic register in the film from a utilitarian tool to a sex toy; her experience of disability is thus configured as posthuman, sexualized without being fetishized. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway writes that, “Modern medicine is [...] full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality.”¹⁴⁷ In *Krutch*, Gimp inserts her non-normative image into the history of sexuality, and in her literal

coupling with a tool designed to enable accessibility (as well as Matthew Clark's behind the scenes transformation of his wheelchair into a dolly for filming the action), the film reconfigures disability as a potential site for empowerment rather than vulnerability, for expansion instead of lack. Unlike Shyla, Mia Gimp takes charge of her own sexuality by deriving sexual pleasure from the very thing that enables her mobility outside of the bedroom. She describes making the film as a deeply empowering experience, as is the viewing of it: when it screened at the 2013 Public.Provocative.Porn festival in Toronto, the audience response was explosively positive.¹⁴⁸

Clark Matthews explains how, when we see Gimp walking down the street at the beginning, "the audience [...] are just gonna project whatever they think her life must be like: 'Oh she's rushing off to a doctor's appointment – poor thing,'" and then the filmmakers, "through just images alone, reveal a different side to her," so that when we see her walking down the street again at the end of the film, "the audience's perceptions have totally been subverted."¹⁴⁹ In other words, by the film's end, she has transformed from a desexualized and "hypervulnerable" stereotype of disability into a sexualized being, a whole person. In the final scene, Gimp is joined by another person, a politicized choice on the part of the filmmakers to frame her as desirable:

The most common thing is the desexualization or disabled people seen as asexual, which is why at the end of the film somebody joins me in the bedroom just for this little moment, to show that, yeah, I can masturbate, but I can have other partners as well.¹⁵⁰ And again, unlike in *Poor Little Shyla*, her desirability is not separated out from her disability. Gimp is depicted as desirable just as she is.

So while the videos produced by Girlfriends Films complicate the distinctions between queer/lesbian/feminist porn and mainstream girl-on-girl content in the ways outlined above, they

nonetheless replicate dominant narratives about disability. Although it is not the kind of disability fetish porn that one might unearth from the depths of the Internet, *Poor Little Shyla* simultaneously hypersexualizes and disavows the title character's disability. The ironic title, implying as it does that she should be pitied, as well as the film's first scene, in which Shyla is sexually assaulted by her able-bodied classmates, effectively sexualize disability while removing it from any sort of specific, human context. Disability is abstracted and objectified as a stereotype of hypervulnerability, and that vulnerability is what is sexualized. At the same time, the only scene in which Shyla actually participates willingly in sexual acts is the dream sequence in which her classmate's mother imagines her as able-bodied, a transformation that implies that she is not desirable as she is.

In talking about her motivations for creating feminist porn, Mia Gimp cites, "not only more exposure for female disabled bodies but also to have a disabled person performing."¹⁵¹ Here she touches upon another important distinction between *Krutch* and *Poor Little Shyla*. For a filmmaker who emphasizes the importance of authenticity when it comes to the sexuality of his performers, it is strange that Dan O'Connell is so apparently unconcerned with authenticity when it comes to representing disability. It is worth questioning, why does he hire only women who identify as lesbian or bisexual, but has no problem with allowing an able-bodied woman to perform disability? It seems likely that the discrepancy can be attributed to marketing imperatives. O'Connell makes no claims for a political motivation behind his desire for authenticity. Unlike filmmakers like Courtney Trouble, he doesn't hire "real queer" performers because he believes that it is important to show "under-represented erotic realities." He hires lesbian and bisexual women because he believes it makes for more realistic and thus more enjoyable, and therefore more marketable, pornography. The implication here – unintentional

though it may be – is that a truly disabled body may not be desirable or marketable. When the realities of a person’s identity become inconvenient, they are typically elided altogether in mainstream porn.

Meanwhile, the politics of queer and feminist porn insist that inconvenient realities should not be erased, but rather highlighted. Taormino, for instance, says that, for her, creating “more realistic portrayals of sex” involves “filming it all”: the use of lube, sex toys, foreplay, and so on. “It was especially important that scenes of performers using lube for anal penetration did not end up on the cutting room floor as they often do because they are messy, awkward, or noneventful. Sometimes sex is messy, awkward, or noneventful.”¹⁵² Indeed, queer and feminist porn tend to leave in the messy parts – falls, as in *Krutch*, or moments, as in *Seven Minutes in Heaven*, when a performer needs to tell another to adjust the speed and pressure of her manual stimulation – in an attempt to create more authentic portrayals of sex and sexuality. This has a political and a pedagogical function, as it teaches viewers that all bodies are different and emphasizes the importance of communication, consent, and safety.

This insistence on leaving in the “messiness” of sexual encounters is in direct opposition to what Tobi Hill-Meyer, a feminist, trans woman filmmaker, identifies as the mainstream porn formula:

All the mainstream porn I see is driven by formula. It’s a business model developed decades ago, with minor adjustments for technology and genre. This cookie cutter model requires that everything tells the same story again and again. The same body types. The same sex acts. The same beginning, middle, and end. I could point to any number of specific details I try to do differently, but the main one is that I try to avoid being formulaic.¹⁵³

This is not to say that feminist porn cannot be formulaic in any way, but rather that it strives to resist and revise dominant narratives. The acknowledgment of women and couples as a major growth market has allowed for somewhat less minor adjustments in representations of women in porn (both in front of and behind the camera) and has enabled the proliferation of feminist porn as a subgenre, but the “cookie cutter model” described by Hill-Meyer continues to dominate the industry, privileging certain types of bodies and sex acts: cis-gendered and gender normative, white, slender, able-bodied performers engaging in vaginal or anal intercourse and/or oral sex. As I have discussed in this and the previous chapters, many of the filmmakers I have spoken to have suggested that mainstream distributors do expect filmmakers to adhere to formulas with regard to the number of sexual positions and the types of bodies and sex acts that can be depicted; whether it’s the ban on fisting, or the insistence that women of color can only make films that feature people of color, or the requirement for a minimum number of cum shots per film.

Hill-Meyer adds, however, that this reliance on formula cannot only be attributed to (or blamed on) the industry itself, but also to consumers’ expectations and implicit biases:

I want to be careful not to conflate my criticism here with judgment. It’s become a self-perpetuating cycle. Mainstream audiences are only ever shown one thing, so that’s what they demand. Producers meet that demand because they get blowback whenever they deviate. For example, I noticed a scene on Kink.com’s trans woman / cis woman focused site that was a threesome with a trans woman and a cis woman with a strap-on both fucking another cis woman. The first comment posted to it was complaining along the lines of “This is a TS [transsexual] scene not a lesbian scene, get that strap on out of there.” Everything is so compartmentalized and formulaic, there’s a strong possibility of

losing customers if they change anything. Still, change has to start somewhere. And I think mainstream porn producers often underestimate their audience and how many people would be really excited to see a departure from the same old same old.¹⁵⁴

Indeed, change does have to start somewhere, and in the last five to ten years, a number of producers have attempted to make themselves the change they seek. Feminist and queer pornographers tend to insist upon such change on the level of production practices as well as the politics of representation. Hill-Meyer herself is one such pornographer, and she has recently launched a website, *Doing It Online*, as a follow-up to her independently produced videos focusing on trans women, *Doing It Again, Vols. 1-3*. Courtney Trouble specifically describes the site as “a decidedly more commercial effort than artsy indie DVDs.”¹⁵⁵ Indicative of the alternative sources of funding that independent pornographers may need to seek out, the second DVD in the series was funded through crowdsourcing, via Kickstarter, and earned more than twice its funding goal. Hill-Meyer acknowledges the need for a diverse range of images of queer and trans* bodies and sexualities, as depictions of underrepresented identities or communities that always bear an undue burden of representation. Regarding the decision to work on both the DVD projects and the website, she explains:

It’s given me the chance to show a wide diversity of experiences. That’s important to me because whenever people are underrepresented, it’s tempting to look at each representation as needing to cover everybody and that’s not possible. There is no one trans woman story that can cover us all. So instead of telling one story, I’m telling a dozen. Then a dozen more. Even that is not enough, but it’s getting closer.¹⁵⁶

So quantity is, in some sense, as important as quality, when it comes to the politics of feminist porn representation, marginalized peoples' access to means of production, and dialogues about porn.

In terms of representation, there is, of course, always the danger of creating new – albeit more marginal – formulas in opposition to the mainstream, but one of the primary reasons why the refusal of labels or tags on queer porn sites is so revolutionary is that it encourages the transgression of arbitrary but well-established boundaries. With regard to mainstream porn sites, Hill-Meyer suggests,

Then there's a whole set of conventions that it's okay to break as long as it's only one at a time and segregated by itself. There's BBW [Big Beautiful Women] porn, inked porn, trans porn, hairy porn, Asian porn, Latina porn, and dozens of other genres, but if you are any of those things you have to be segregated. Heaven forbid a trans woman performs in girl-on-girl or a woman with tattoos perform in BBW porn. If you're lucky you can get away with having two of those qualities, but three or more and there's practically no chance you'll ever find work. This approach treats people as interchangeable and disposable and loses touch with what's unique about each performer and the powerful connections that I believe sex is all about.¹⁵⁷

Here, Hill-Meyer points to the ways in which otherness is marked in mainstream porn. One form of otherness may or may not lead to marginalization or the devaluation of a performer's labor. Jessica Drake insists that, for her productions at Wicked Pictures, she pays all of her performers the same rate, but acknowledges that most producers pay performers differently, according to their race and body type, with slender, white women earning the highest rates.

If one body contains more than one form of otherness, then the marginalization is compounded. Kimberle Crenshaw, in a series of important articles about intersectionality, argues that, “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.”¹⁵⁸ As Hill-Meyer suggests, the same is true for performers with a variety of different racial, gender, and sexual identities and body types. In the world of mainstream pornography, the choice to mark one’s body with tattoos also marks one off as other, and can in fact prevent a performer from securing roles in mainstream companies. Dan O’Connell, for instance, made a point of telling me that he avoids hiring women with fake breasts or tattoos for his lesbian porn productions.¹⁵⁹ This would seem to exclude transwomen from participation in his lesbian porn, even as it upholds normative modes of gender expression. In this formulation, “natural” is superior, and to be a natural woman means to have been born with natural breasts, and to choose not to augment or permanently alter them or any other part of one’s body. Dyed hair, however, does not seem to present a problem for O’Connell’s vision of the natural woman, perhaps due to its relative impermanence, and perhaps because it does not carry the same socio-political baggage.

O’Connell’s selection criteria would seem to align with certain strains of (second wave) feminist thought, which similarly critique the practice of breast augmentation and other forms of plastic surgery as reinforcing or contributing to patriarchal gender norms and the pathologizing of difference. Susan Bordo, for instance, remarks upon “breast augmentation, now increasingly widespread, and its role in establishing new norms against which small or less firm breasts are seen as defective. Such ‘disorders’ are of course aesthetic and completely socially ‘constructed.’”¹⁶⁰ These ideas, however well-intentioned, can however be used to further

pathologize other forms of difference. When the anti-implant ideology is codified into a selection criteria for performers at a major porn studio, it functions to marginalize not only women who have made a choice to augment their breasts purely for aesthetic purposes, but also transwomen and breast cancer survivors who have undergone breast reconstruction involving implants. By extension, the privileging of the natural also works to exclude women like Gimp, who rely on “artificial” structures for mobility. Ironically, these critiques of plastic surgery can themselves function to uphold patriarchal ideals by suggesting that there is only one kind of “real” woman: the natural kind.

In direct opposition to this way of thinking, queer porn, and queer theory more broadly, seek to denaturalize various identity categories. Crenshaw argues that, although they are often discussed in “mainstream liberal discourse [...] as vestiges of bias or domination,” identity politics “can instead be the source of political empowerment and social reconstruction.”¹⁶¹ Queer porn, in a sense, allows users and performers alike to have it both ways, by allowing for the acknowledgment of various identity categories without exploiting them for marketing purposes: sites like QueerPorn.TV include performer bios, in which they are able to self-identify however they so choose, and films like *Seven Minutes in Heaven* tend to include sequences in which performers introduce themselves according to their preferences, but the porn itself defies mainstream frameworks of categorization. As discussed above, the sites refuse to taxonomize their content, and marketing materials for queer porn DVDs tend not to comment on, hierarchize, or fetishize their performers’ gender, sexual, or racial identities or body types.

As Coco la Crème remarked during the Q&A following the screening of *Krutch* (and several other films) in Toronto as part of the 2013 Feminist Porn Awards, “For consumers, I think there is so much more for them to choose from than there was when this journey began.”¹⁶²

Indeed there is, and although queer and feminist porn continue to be less accessible than mainstream output, they nonetheless have been receiving a disproportionate amount of attention in academic and popular realms, thanks to the publication of the *Feminist Porn Book* and the coverage of the annual Feminist Porn Conference. The significance of the proliferation of and attention to queer and feminist porn cannot be overstated. As genderqueer performer Jiz Lee writes in their contribution to the *Feminist Porn Book*, “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.”¹⁶³ This form of cultural production may remain marginalized in the currently repressive sexual climate of the United States, but as its visibility continues to increase, its impact can be momentous. “A desire that cannot be named or described” – or, I would add, depicted – “is a desire that cannot be valued, acted upon, or used as the basis for an identity,”¹⁶⁴ Pat Califia argues, acknowledging the political urgency of public sex and sexuality; and as long as practices of media consolidation and de facto censorship (via the MPAA) reign in Hollywood, feminist and queer pornographies remain among the most important venues for this sort of articulation.

¹ Nan Kinney, “Lesbo Retro” Screening and Q&A, *The Feminist Porn Conference*, University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 219.

⁴ Ibid., 219.

⁵ Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 182.

⁶ Shine Louise Houston, interview by author, phone recording, December 6, 2010.

⁷ Candida Royalle, “Porn in the USA,” in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 541.

⁸ Annie Sprinkle, interview by author, phone recording, January 22, 2014.

⁹ Madison Young, interview by author, phone recording, November 9, 2010.

¹⁰ Candida Royalle, “What’s a Nice Girl Like You...,” in *The Feminist Porn Book*, ed. Constance Penley et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 66.

¹¹ Candida Royalle, interview by author, phone recording, June 7, 2006.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Candida Royalle, “Porn in the USA,” 545.

¹⁴ Quoted in Reina Gattuso, “How to Make a Feminist Porno,” *Manifesta*, April 24, 2013, <http://manifestamagazine.com/2013/04/24/how-to-make-a-feminist-porno>.

¹⁵ See, in particular, Linda Williams, “Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and the ‘Money Shot,’” in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 [1989]), 93-199.

¹⁶ Candida Royalle, “Porn in the USA,” 547.

¹⁷ Cuddly Wombat (user), response to “How Important is the Pop Shot?”, *Adult DVD Talk Forum*, February 22, 2010, accessed March 25, 2012, <http://forum.adultdvdtalk.com/how-important-is-the-pop-shot/>.

¹⁸ HeyNow (user), response to “How Important is the Pop Shot?”, *Adult DVD Talk Forum*, February 22, 2010, accessed March 25, 2012, <http://forum.adultdvdtalk.com/how-important-is-the-pop-shot/>.

¹⁹ BumBum (user), response to “How Important is the Pop Shot?”, *Adult DVD Talk Forum*, February 22, 2010, accessed March 25, 2012, <http://forum.adultdvdtalk.com/how-important-is-the-pop-shot/>.

²⁰ Constance Penley et al, “Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure,” *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Constance Penley et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 9.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Tristan Taormino, “The Feminist Pornographer” (interview with Tracy Clark-Flory), *Salon* February 24, 2013, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/02/24/the_feminist_pornographer/.

²³ Both quote and image from Ms. Naughty, “Periodic Table of Feminist Porn,” *Feminist Porn Guide*, last updated August 24, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.feministpornguide.com/periodictable.html>.

²⁴ “Lesbo Retro” Screening and Q&A.

²⁵ Tasha Reign, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, October 11, 2012.

²⁶ Candida Royalle, “What’s a Nice Girl Like You...,” 64.

²⁷ Constance Penley, Mireille Miller-Young, and Tristan Taormino, "Keynote Luncheon," *The Feminist Porn Conference*, University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

²⁸ "Afrodite Superstar Press Kit," *Femme Productions*, 2007, accessed April 2, 2014, http://abiolaabrams.com/afrodite_superstar_black_erotica.html.

²⁹ Diana DeVoe, interview by author, audio recording, Woodland Hills, CA, October 19, 2010.

³⁰ Laura Helen Marks, "Legacy, Wreck, and the Futures of Hip-Hop Feminism in Afrodite Superstar," *phoebe* 20:1 (Spring 2008), 1.

³¹ Barbara G. Walker, quoted in Laura Helen Marks, "Legacy, Wreck, and the Futures of Hip-Hop Feminism in Afrodite Superstar," 9.

³² "Afrodite Superstar Press Kit."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Abiola Abrams, "AfroDite Superstar: Abiola Abrams' Hip-Hop Alt Porn" (interview with Mireille Miller-Young), *Spread* 5.1 (Summer 2009), 44.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ "Afrodite Superstar," press kit.

³⁷ Abiola Abrams, "AfroDite Superstar," 44.

³⁸ Ibid., 44.

³⁹ "Afrodite Superstar Press Kit."

⁴⁰ Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12: 1 (1985), 213.

⁴¹ In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1996), 170.

⁴² Jackie Strano, in *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism* (2009), dir. Virginie Despentes, prod.

Morgane Production, Pink TV, Centre National de la Cinematographie (CNC), distr. Dissidenz International.

⁴³ Trouble's deal, discussed in greater detail in the Conclusion, is forthcoming as of May 2014.

⁴⁴ Constance Penley et al, "Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure," 11.

⁴⁵ Jackie Strano, in *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism* (2009).

⁴⁶ Constance Penley et al, "Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure," 10.

⁴⁷ Tristan Taormino, interview by author, phone recording, August 14, 2011.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mireille Miller-Young, "Sexual Cultures and Sex Work" (Graduate Seminar), Instr. Constance Penley, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 18, 2010.

⁵¹ As of 2014, the documentary has not yet been released.

⁵² Tristan Taormino, Lecture for "Sexual Cultures and Sex Work" (Graduate Seminar), Instr. Constance Penley, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 18, 2010.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Linda Williams, *Hard Core*.

⁵⁵ Susan Murray, "'I Think We Need a New Name for It': The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 46.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Sconce, "See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo!" in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 262.

⁵⁷ Jon Kraszewski, "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 179.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Sconce, "See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo!," 260.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 262.

⁶¹ This constitutes the first installment in the four-volume *Chemistry* series.

⁶² Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶³ By "mainstream," I refer to the sort of porn that one could find in a typical adult video store.

⁶⁴ The term for a woman's anal penetration of a man, using a strap-on dildo.

⁶⁵ In this context, "rough sex" refers to sex involving BDSM roleplaying and/or actions: spanking and other forms of sensation play, the enactment of rape or other power fantasies, bondage, domination and submission, degradation, and so on.

⁶⁶ Tristan Taormino, "... On Crossing the Line to Make Feminist Porn," in *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, ed. Carly Milne (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 88-9.

⁶⁷ This quote is not from Stagliano himself, but from an unidentified source (described only as an "insider") quoted in Tristan Taormino, "... On Crossing the Line to Make Feminist Porn," 92. The confirms that Stagliano had a reputation for refusing to allow condoms in his movies.

⁶⁸ Tristan Taormino, "...On Crossing the Line to Create Feminist Porn," 95.

⁶⁹ Several interview subjects mentioned this in passing, including Nina Hartley.

⁷⁰ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990 (1978)).

⁷¹ Mireille Miller-Young, “Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors,” 107.

⁷² This idea is elaborated in Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, ed. G. Bridges and R. Brunt (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1981).

⁷³ Generally speaking, Latino and Asian men – when they appear at all, which is rare – are categorized with white men. Incidentally, this is something that performer Mika Tan, who appears in *Chemistry*, is hoping to change; she has produced and is seeking distribution for a mainstream heterosexual video highlighting Asian men.

⁷⁴ Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 275.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, her discussion of *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* in “... On Crossing the Line to Make Feminist Porn,” 87-98.

⁷⁷ Soraya Chemaly, “6 Reasons Female Nudity Can Be Powerful,” *Salon*, January 22, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014,

http://www.salon.com/2014/01/22/6_reasons_female_nudity_can_be_powerful/.

⁷⁸ Jessica Drake, “Porn, Prostitution, and Censorship: The Politics of Empowerment” (Panel), The Social Awareness Network for Activism through Art, University of California, Los Angeles, February 18, 2014.

⁷⁹ Mireille Miller-Young, “Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors,” 111.

⁸⁰ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

⁸¹ Soraya Chemaly, “6 Reasons Female Nudity Can Be Powerful.”

⁸² This quote is from Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), but the sentiment can also be found in the writings of Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and many other “second-wave” feminists.

⁸³ Q&A with Nan Kinney and Shar Rednour following the “Lesbo Retro” screening, *The Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

⁸⁴ Courtney Trouble, “Queer Porn Panel,” *Q Speak: A Speaker Series of All Things LGBT*, The Center Long Beach, September 24, 2011.

⁸⁵ Jessica Drake explained the latter, at “Porn, Prostitution, and Censorship: The Politics of Empowerment.”

⁸⁶ Mika Tan exposes this hypocrisy in a confessional in which she speaks eloquently about how she is in fact bisexual in her personal life, and how much she enjoys working with other women who genuinely like women.

⁸⁷ According to Mark Kernes, interview by author, June 9, 2006.

⁸⁸ This refers to the handheld camera given to the performers to shoot one another.

⁸⁹ GabyC, “Post Porn Modernist (Post Porn Modernism, Post Porn)”; this definition was an attachment in an email correspondence with Annie Sprinkle.

⁹⁰ Beatriz Preciado, quoted in GabyC, “Post Porn Modernist (Post Porn Modernism, Post Porn).”

⁹¹ *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism* (2009).

⁹² Tristan Taormino, interview.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ As I begin to indicate here, the concept of the “male audience” that porn has been designed to accommodate is purely a socio-economic construct. “What men want” does not refer to actual male human beings but to a popularized conception of male desire; it is simply a way to talk about the assumptions that inform the output of the mainstream adult video industry.

⁹⁶ Williams’s phrasing, in “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border,” 274.

⁹⁷ Gail Dines, “King Kong and the White Woman: Hustler Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity,” *Violence Against Women* 4:3 (June 1998), 293.

⁹⁸ Quoted on the DVD cover for *Chemistry vol. 1* (2006), and reproduced on Taormino’s website, <http://puckerup.com/feminist-porn/reviews-chemistry-1/>.

⁹⁹ Tristan Taormino, interview.

¹⁰⁰ Katrien Jacobs, “The New Media Schooling of the Amateur Pornographer: Negotiating Contracts and Singing Orgasm,” *Spectator* 24:1 (Spring 2004).

¹⁰¹ Dan O’Connell, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, February 5, 2014.

¹⁰² See LaBruce’s book, *The Reluctant Pornographer* (Distributed Art Pub. Inc., 1997) and films such as *Skin Flick* (1999), and Del LaGrace Volcano’s publications such as *Sex Works* (Konkursbuchverlag, 2005) and her film, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1997).

¹⁰³ Chris Straayer, “The Seduction of Boundaries: Feminist Fluidity in Annie Sprinkle’s Art/Education/Sex,” *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, eds. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: BFI, 1993), 156.

¹⁰⁴ Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 228.

¹⁰⁵ See <http://www.buckangel.com/>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Barbara de Genevieve, "Ssspread.com: The Hot Bods of Queer Porn," in *C'lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader*, eds. Katrien Jacobs et al (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), 233.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 234.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹¹⁰ Pat Califia, "Gay Men, Lesbians, and Sex: Doing It Together" (1983), in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 198.

¹¹¹ A search for NoFauxxx.com will now be redirected to <http://www.indiepornrevolution.com/indie-porn/>.

¹¹² See <http://www.indiepornrevolution.com/>.

¹¹³ Jennifer Moorman, "Gay for Pay, Gay For(e)play: The Politics of Taxonomy and Authenticity in LGBTQ Online Porn," *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography (Digital Formations* vol. 48), ed. Feona Attwood (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 165.

¹¹⁴ Courtney Trouble, interview by author, email, October 23, 2008.

¹¹⁵ "They" is Trouble's preferred gender pronoun.

¹¹⁶ Courtney Trouble, interview.

¹¹⁷ Courtney Trouble, "Porn's New Key Words" (Closing Keynote), *The 2nd Annual Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, April 6, 2014.

¹¹⁸ Jennifer Moorman, "Gay for Pay, Gay For(e)play," 155-56.

¹¹⁹ Zabet Patterson, “Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 107.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²¹ Barbara de Genevieve, “Ssspread.com: The Hot Bods of Queer Porn,” 234.

¹²² Jennifer Moorman, “Gay for Pay, Gay For(e)play,” 156.

¹²³ See <http://www.tube8.com/categories.html>.

¹²⁴ Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers?,” 191.

¹²⁵ From the *No Fauxxxx* home page, accessed March 3, 2012, formerly at <http://www.nofauxxx.com/>.

¹²⁶ Courtney Trouble, interview.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ “Awards and Notables,” *Courtney Trouble*, accessed April 5, 2014, <http://courtneytrouble.com/awards-and-notables/>.

¹²⁹ “Press Release,” *Good Releasing*, September 18, 2009, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://goodreleasing.com/press-release-good-vibrations-launches-new-video-production-company/>.

¹³⁰ Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview by author, phone recording, April 17, 2014.

¹³¹ Q&A with Nan Kinney and Shar Rednour following the “Lesbo Retro” screening.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Dan O’Connell, interview.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Tristan Taormino, "... On Crossing the Line to Make Feminist Porn," 95.

¹³⁸ Dan O'Connell, interview.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Loree Erickson, "Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!," in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Constance Penley et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 320.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 326.

¹⁴² Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 136-7.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴⁴ Loree Erickson, "Out of Line: The Sexy Femmegimp Politics of Flaunting It!," 322.

¹⁴⁵ Mia Gimp, interview with Kevin Heffernan, video recording, Toronto, ON, May 8, 2013, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjtWAoNdgQ4>.

¹⁴⁶ Mia Gimp, Q&A following the Public.Provocative.Porn Screening, moderated by Coco la Crème, Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, Toronto, ON, April 4, 2013.

¹⁴⁷ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Techonology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

¹⁴⁸ Their film got the strongest reaction – the loudest cheers and claps – of all seven films screened that evening.

¹⁴⁹ Clark Matthews, interview with Kevin Heffernan, video recording, Toronto, ON, May 8, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjtWAoNdgQ4>.

¹⁵⁰ Mia Gimp, interview with Kelly Shibari, “6.9 Questions with Mia Gimp and Clark Matthews,” video recording, May 8, 2013, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftcHSbYvPnQ>.

¹⁵¹ Mia Gimp, Q&A following the Public.Provocative.Porn Screening.

¹⁵² Tristan Taormino, “... On Crossing the Line to Make Feminist Porn,” 90-1.

¹⁵³ Tobi Hill-Meyer, “Tobi Hill-Meyer: Trans Positive Porn Trailblazer” (interview with Courtney Trouble), *Original Plumbing*, March 24, 2014, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.originalplumbing.com/index.php/society-culture/smut/item/780-tobi-hill-meyer-trans-positive-porn>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Courtney Trouble, “Tobi Hill-Meyer: Trans Positive Porn Trailblazer.”

¹⁵⁶ Tobi Hill-Meyer, “Tobi Hill-Meyer: Trans Positive Porn Trailblazer.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43:1241 (July 1991), 1244 [in reference to her earlier article, Kimberle Crenshaw, 1989. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.].

¹⁵⁹ Dan O’Connell, interview.

¹⁶⁰ Susan Bordo, “Twenty Years in the Twilight Zone,” in *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer*, Ed. Cressida J. Hayes and Meredith Jones (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 25.

¹⁶¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” 1242.

¹⁶² Coco la Crème, Q&A following the Public.Provocative.Porn Screening, Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, Toronto, April 4, 2013.

¹⁶³ Jiz Lee, “Uncategorized: Genderqueer Identity and Performance in Independent and Mainstream Porn,” in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Constance Penley et al (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 275.

¹⁶⁴ Pat Califia, “Introduction: Or It Is Always Right to Rebel,” in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), xxi.

CHAPTER 4

#Anal4Art: Women Filmmakers, Alt-Porn, and the “Thin Line” Between Art and Porn

I'm put into the category of alt-porn [...] which actually is freeing, because it means that certain rules don't really apply. – Margie Schnibbe/Vena Virago

Being both in front of the camera and behind the camera for me is part of a larger mission that I've had since I was very young, about creating space for people to feel comfortable expressing themselves without shame, either through art or through sex. – Madison Young

I'm just very strong-willed and very bossy, and I just want to make good art. So if that's feminist, put the label on it, but I'm not a feminist. – Kimberly Kane

On November 13, 2009, the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles, dedicated to showcasing “community filmmaking & micro cinema,” screened local artist Margie Schnibbe’s “latest commercial porn film reimagined, reshot & remixed by 13 video artists from Brooklyn.”¹ Called “An Evening of Sex and Bunnies,” the event epitomizes the intersections between the art world and alt-porn, a subgenre preoccupied with art and aesthetics. When making porn, Schnibbe works under the name Vena Virago, though she is not at all concerned with compartmentalizing or hiding her forays into creating adult content. She approached me to introduce herself, after I had mentioned my dissertation topic at the Q&A following a program of experimental films (“Unruly Bodies, Transgressive Appropriations”). Her business card, printed with different text on either side, immediately announced her dual identity as artist and pornographer.



Fig. 4.1: Margie Schnibbe/Vena Virago's business card

This card acknowledges a connection between her identities as artist and pornographer, and also reaffirms a division between them – when holding the card, after all, one can only see one side or the other at any given moment. Her career demonstrates the many links between them.

Perusing the “Videos” section of her website, one can find trailers for all of the porn films that she directed for mainstream companies, mixed together with her experimental video work. The film that screened at the Echo Park Film Center, *Honey Bunny v.2.1* (2009) is a collaborative, experimental reworking of *Honey Bunny* (2008), a film that she had directed for a mainstream porn studio’s “alt” imprint, Vivid-ALT. *Honey Bunny* itself was shot inside a series of art installations that Schnibbe had created at Circus Gallery for that specific purpose, and incorporates various artistic flourishes, such as experimental video effects (like compositing and superimposition), direct address to the camera, and intermittent semi-abstract animation. In this way, the film seamlessly interweaves the conventions and preoccupations of both fine art and pornography, thereby occupying a liminal space between the two.

Alt-porn can be defined and historicized in a variety of ways. It is most often, and most broadly, defined as “alternative pornographies,” but this begs several questions – alternative to what, and in what sense? It is sometimes conflated with all queer, independent, and amateur pornographies, but for my purposes, it will be useful to acknowledge that while all of these may indeed offer alternatives to mainstream, corporate pornography, there are nonetheless important distinctions between them as well as important intersections. In this chapter, I will be focusing on alt-porn as a primarily aesthetic category, as the subgenre of porn that is perhaps most concerned with the “foregrounding of technical and artistic qualities.”² There is a fair amount of overlap between queer and alt pornographies, but the mainstream has co-opted alt porn

wholesale – swallowing up key figures as well as the overall aesthetics associated with it – and as of yet, has not subsumed or appropriated queer porn in an analogous way.

One might say that queer porn is a subset of alt-porn, but it is more productive here to say that they are two separate, if sometimes overlapping, types of alternative pornographies. Both prioritize their relationships to subcultures or communities, and both tend to showcase nontraditional performers. Piercings and other body modifications are common in both categories, but queer porn is more likely to feature unconventional (by porn standards) body types. This challenge to industry norms can be attributed to what is perhaps the key difference between the two categories: queer porn's investment in politics. Alt-porn (and some queer porn) is distinguished through its commitment to a striking visual style, created by using techniques, images, and processes borrowed from the fine arts, art cinema, and the avant-garde, and through its cross-media synergies with specific alternative subcultures, primarily punk and Goth. The DVD for *Triple Ecstasy* (2007), Kimberly Kane's second film for Vivid-ALT, for instance, comes with the film's original indie/punk soundtrack on CD. Alt-porn, broadly speaking, has a variety of antecedents and influences, including the punk videos of Richard Kern and stylized art porn by Andrew Blake. In sum, both queer and alt-porn focus on nontraditional aesthetics, but whereas alt more broadly, and especially corporate alt, is typically assumed to be devoid of politics, queer porn is decidedly not.

In this final chapter, I will discuss some examples of queer alt-porn production in conjunction with more mainstream or straight instances, all of which share a preoccupation with art or artistry as well as their investment in subcultural capital. Previous academic discussions of alt-porn have focused almost exclusively on its earlier web-based incarnations, sometimes even substituting the term "netporn" for alt-porn.³ Susanna Paasonen, in "Labors of Love: Netporn,

Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism,” distinguishes between netporn, a term that has come to describe “the proliferation of independent and alternative pornographies” online, and “porn on the net,” which “refers to the recycling of the same old pornographic images and texts from print media, video and film on the internet.”⁴ Among all of the types of work that I discuss in this project, alt and queer porn are the only ones to have developed first online, and as such they are inextricably linked to certain medium-specific qualities, including “the blurred boundaries of porn producers and consumers” and an investment in community participation.⁵ At the same time, the mainstream adult video industry was quick to appropriate alt-porn, as both a style and community of production, in ways that are not entirely antithetical to the subgenre’s initial antiestablishment ethos. Mainstream and queer alt-porn production alike have enabled revisionings of women’s sexuality on a representational level, as well as new avenues of access for women filmmakers’ cultural production. Thus a discussion of “mainstream alt,” though it may seem like a contradiction in terms, is overdue.

Both alt and queer porn have been accessible to women’s cultural production in a way that the mainstream industry, historically, has not, and this fact is no doubt tied to their technological genesis. Technological advancements have enabled new forms of access for minoritarian filmmakers in a variety of contexts; the emergence of affordable camera equipment in popular markets following the advent of video technology certainly allowed people with less access to high finance (including women) to create their own work in porn, independent filmmaking, and the avant-garde. As with more mainstream media, however, finding a way to shoot porn is generally the least of one’s problems; finding distribution makes the difference between a home video and a porno film with a market share. And the adult video industry is

largely controlled by a handful of powerful, large-scale distribution companies, including Pulse, Anabolic, Vivid, Hustler, and Evil Angel.

The Internet, and porn's near-immediate entry into it, has helped to somewhat democratize porn production, specifically with regard to the distribution sector. Audacia Ray (who has directed a porn film of her own, *The Bi Apple* (2007), and been featured as a model on several of the alt sites mentioned here) writes in *Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads, and Cashing in on Internet Sexploration*, that "small-scale, women-run businesses are a mainstay of the online porn industry in the cultural sense. The idea of a woman running her own site seems more personable and sexier than a corporate entity."⁶ According to Ray, then, being an individual woman – particularly one with an extant fan base – is a benefit rather than a liability when it comes to online porn, as opposed to DVDs sold on the Internet, which continue to be handled predominantly by the major distribution companies. While this marks an important distinction in terms of distribution, at the same time, the marketability of a woman's established brand in online contexts can be read as analogous to performers' star power enabling access to production channels for offline pornographies.

By 1992, the Internet had become "such a part of the computing establishment that a professional society form[ed] to guide it on its way."⁷ Alt-porn originated around 1993, "drawing on [print] magazines such as the Goth-themed *Blue Blood* (est. 1992)."⁸ *Blue Blood* went online in 1994, followed by *Raver Porn* and *Nakkid Nerds* in 1999.⁹ Most alt-porn sites feature softcore photo sets and/or videos involving non-traditional nude models whose tattoos, dyed hair, and body piercings provide visual associations with music subcultures, typically punk or Goth. *Suicide Girls*, established in 2001, is perhaps the subgenre's most (in)famous incarnation, thanks to scandals that later emerged around co-founder Spooky Suicide's handling

of modeling contracts (discussed in more detail below). With her site, *Burning Angel*, however, businesswoman and filmmaker Joanna Angel initiated alt's entrée into hardcore. As she explained it to me, she and her college roommate created the site together on a whim in 2002:

I was like, "Oh, we should put girls with tattoos," because that was the community we [were] invested in. I didn't know anything about porn at that point, so I didn't know that porn was an industry filled with blonde hair, fake boobs, tan girls, and all shot in LA. I had no idea that what I was coming up with was something new.¹⁰

As with *Suicide Girls*, *Burning Angel* combines "the pornographic with the subcultural: their tattooed and pierced female models present their sexual appetites, lifestyles and music preferences in model biographies and blogs."¹¹ In this way, the sites allow users to engage directly with the models as human beings through online chats, or at least to get a sense of the models' preferences, desires, and personalities through the bios and blogs, all of which in turn helps to generate a sense of community. As Ray suggests, "Though many of the women involved in alt porn culture have turned their passion into their business, most of them started out more interested in culture and politics than in the financial opportunities of Internet porn."¹²

This was clearly true for Joanna Angel. When she first created *Burning Angel*, she charged members only a nominal fee – ten dollars a month – for access to the site. At the time, Angel was working at a strip club, where she happened to meet an unnamed insider from the porn industry. She mentioned her site and after he had looked it up, he got in touch with her and,

He's like, "What the fuck are you doing? You're running a porn company out of your bedroom for fun! This is amazing, but this is ridiculous." [...] In a place where porn equaled money, he was just so confused about why a girl would be running a porn site that didn't make any money. [...] There was something charming about it, but anyone

who knew anything about business could look at it and be like, there's no way this makes any money. [...] He was the one who basically told me, "You know that this is a big industry? And there's a lot of money in this industry [...] and you should really take this to the next level, because you have something cool."¹³

From there, Angel's is an unadulterated success story. She changed the subscription settings for her site (eventually to the current monthly rate of \$29.95, with additional options for longer subscriptions), and went on to enter the mainstream industry in more traditional ways.

After attending the Adult Entertainment Expo, she and her business partner decided that they should make DVDs, because, as Angel puts it, "That was the first time I really saw that porn was an industry."¹⁴ Angel's entry into DVD production coincided with the general mainstreaming of alt-porn. Eon McKai created what is often described as the first alt-porn DVD, *Art School Sluts*, for VCA/Hustler in 2004.¹⁵ Angel's first video, *Joanna's Angels*, was released the following year, also by VCA/Hustler. In 2006, McKai was hired by Vivid to run his own line, Vivid-ALT. During his tenure there, in addition to directing his own work, he hired women like Kimberly Kane and Vena Virago to direct for the line, and in this way, mainstream alt-porn, in addition to the original online incarnations of alt, has provided significant avenues of access for women as cultural producers in the porn industry.

Although alt-porn originated as an alternative to the mainstream, it would be fallacious to assume that there have not been overlaps from the beginning. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige remarks upon the inevitable commodification of youth subcultures. He writes that each subculture,

communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult in this case to maintain

any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures.¹⁶

Hebdidge adds that, “punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977.”¹⁷ We thus erect a false binary when we attempt to entirely separate out mainstream from alternative contexts for subcultures. When Vivid created its “ALT” imprint, one could say that alt porn “sold out,” but I am inclined to agree with Susanna Paasonen, when she suggests that, “The mainstream becomes even more elastic a concept in the context of contemporary alt porn practices,”¹⁸ and with Atwood’s contention that, “an overemphasis on the distinction works to erase the movement of style and content between ‘old’ and ‘new,’ ‘online’ and ‘offline’ pornographies.”¹⁹ Indeed, some of the titles produced in corporate contexts, for the likes of Pulse Pictures, VCA, and Vivid-ALT, are among the most aesthetically innovative porn available anywhere.

Kimberly Kane’s directorial debut, *Naked and Famous* (2006, Pulse Pictures), a collection of stylized vignettes produced for a mainstream company, incorporates techniques – such as solarization, freeze frames, and cross-processing – associated with experimental and art film, with a mixture of different video formats and speeds, rapid editing, and an indie/punk soundtrack. The film opens *in medias res*, immediately evoking porn’s affinities with the other arts, as we see Kane – who is in fact a photographer as well as a pornographer – taking Polaroids of two performers engaging in various sex acts. Whenever she takes a shot, an abrupt cut to a black and white freeze frame follows, and in those transitional moments, we watch as pornography is transformed, instantaneously, into art, and back again. A user review by Dr. Jay on *XCritic* clearly articulates the sense of disorientation that this generates:

When the scene abruptly explodes on your screen, Kimberly Kane is busy snapping Polaroid pictures of Faith and Mr. Marcus as they make out in front of a picture window high above the earth in a multistory building (perhaps a hotel). The video speeds up and slows down – and doesn't give a damn whether you like it or not.²⁰

Our entry into the scene is indeed abrupt and frenetic, as the performers are already naked and engaging in sex acts, which comes as an immediate surprise to viewers accustomed to watching the formulaic sex of mainstream porn.

Within the first seconds of the film, then, *Naked and Famous* manages to shake up the typical porn formula in meaningful ways. Rather than showing us the “porn by numbers” of kissing, followed by oral, followed by a minimum of five positions for vaginal penetration, and so on, followed by a money shot, the sex is shot “out of order,” as in sexperimental films like *Fuses* and *Christmas on Earth*. The rejection of formula allows the scene to come across as spontaneous, passionate, and paradoxically – as the effect is created through artificially imposed editing techniques – real. Suddenly, the performers have moved into the bathroom, and the image has become black and white. Kimberly is there, watching them and masturbating, and every so often touching and gently guiding them. This evokes the gonzo technique whereby the cameraman gets in on the action, although it is Jack the Zipper and not Kimberly who holds the videocamera here. The performers, Mr. Marcus and Faith Leon, are a black man and a white woman, respectively, but the sex is never marked off or fetishized as “interracial,” the way it would be in most mainstream porn.

Perhaps even more strikingly, the film's third sex scene, between Charlotte Stokely and James Deen, does not end with a “pop shot,” or external ejaculation, but rather with an “oral creampie,” a far less commonly used convention, in which a male performer ejaculates into a

another performer's mouth, who then allows the semen to drip out (thereby providing the visual "proof" of male climax). Toward the end of their scene, shots of Deen penetrating Stokely are intercut with what seems like flashbacks to earlier moments from the scene, of the pair enacting different sexual positions (including a "sixty-nine"), as the user Dr. Jay rather poetically puts it, "interspersed to provide a sensation that the space-time continuum has been somehow overcome."²¹ It is in one of these "flashbacks" that Deen ejaculates, complicating our sense of whether the scene ends with his orgasm at all.

The art direction throughout the film is equally striking, as when a performer, Smoking Mary Jane, bound to the ceiling and dressed in black and red fetishwear – a red corset, black garters, and long, red satin gloves – slowly dances and twirls in a red, porcelain room. It eventually becomes clear that the "room" is in fact a shower, but it is self-contained, shot in such a way as to exclude our visual access to any other part of the room. When another female performer, Roxy Jezel, enters the frame and proceeds to cane her in a theatrical manner, the bound woman performs fear and pain for us in an even more theatrical – that is, self-consciously campy – fashion. Combined with their wardrobes, this evokes the famous photographs of Bettie Page from the 1950s, even as it acknowledges the performativity of BDSM:



Fig. 4.2: Stills from Naked and Famous



Fig. 4.3: Bettie Page cheesecake photo

Unlike the Bettie Page cheesecake photos, however, the scene that plays out between the two performers in *Naked and Famous* is decidedly hardcore. As opposed to the types of mainstream porn that tend to be criticized for depicting violence against or the roughing up or degradation of women, such as in Max Hardcore's films, in this scene the very performativity of the BDSM scene marks it off as consensual. There is never a question of whether Smoking Mary Jane is genuinely frightened, because the women's actions are clearly confined to a space of play.

One could argue that this reinterpretation of traditional pin-up imagery is no more than a contemporary take on an old form of sexist objectification. In "Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn," Feona Attwood cites Nathan Scott Epley's assertion that the resurgence of interest in 1940s and 1950s pinups, among contemporary hipsters, may well represent a form of ironic and even cynical consumption, endowing hipster consumers with permission to consume misogynistic or heterosexist representations; but that, "Cynicism is not inevitable – feminist appropriations of the pin-up are based on a more passionate relationship in which "the pastiche of familiar conventions of female beauty [is] combined with elements taboo to dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality."²²

In this case, the elements that could be described as "taboo to dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality" include the introduction of a female dominant into the scene, there to pleasure as well as punish the submissive pin-up, and the aforementioned theatricality of both women's performances. Writing about Bettie Page, Attwood refers to the way in which "her exaggerated expressions of shock or dominance work to highlight her sexual activity as a form of play and performance,"²³ and the similarly campy self-consciousness with which Jezeel gently canes Jane, and with which Jane responds to her domination, make it clear to viewers that they are watching the performance of female submission (and, importantly, dominance) rather than

the thing itself. Maria Elena Buszek, in her historical study of the pin-up, argues that pin-up imagery has continued to fascinate largely because it acts as “a kind of visual shorthand for the desirable female,” even as it tends to depict its subjects as “self-aware, assertive, strong, and independent.”²⁴ This scene from *Naked and Famous* does indeed convey these contradictory elements, as two conventionally beautiful women so clearly, and assertively, take pleasure in their own status as visual spectacles, and ultimately become swept up in their self-directed, embodied pleasure in the course of the scene.

The fact that the BDSM elements are combined with hardcore sex in *Naked and Famous* is in fact unusual for the mainstream industry, especially in 2006. As I have argued in previous chapters, due to obscenity law regulations, adult video distributors have historically been wary of films that include both kink (including various fetishes, BDSM elements, fantasies of nonconsent, and rough/violent actions) and hardcore sex in the same scene. Obscenity law does not specifically forbid the combination, but pornography that incorporates kink into scenes of hardcore sex is more likely to be prosecuted as obscene by local or state governments. In 2010, for instance, John “Buttman” Staliagno faced obscenity charges (for which potential damages included up to 32 years in jail and \$7 million in fines) in Washington, D.C., for three of his films: *Milk Nymphos* (2007), due to its “dairy-based enemas,” *Storm Squirters 2: Target Practice* (2007), due to its “water sports” (i.e. urine play), and *Belladonna: Fetish Fanatic 5* (2006), for its inclusion of fetish and BDSM elements.²⁵ The prosecution suggested in its opening argument that, “This case is about crossing the line.”²⁶ The perceived line is that which separates “normal” or vanilla sex from kink in commercial pornography.

BDSM/fetish porn has therefore tended to be segregated from the mainstream, and to include images of BDSM power plays – domination and submission, bondage and discipline,

sadism and masochism – without penetration or other genital sex acts. As Margie Schnibbe puts it, “you can’t have bondage and penetration,” and so if a woman is tied up in a porn film, historically she would not be penetrated until she has been unbound.²⁷ In that sense, BDSM/fetish porn can also be described as alternative pornography – perhaps even among the *most* alternative forms of pornography – although it is not necessarily categorized as “alt-porn” per se. BDSM and fetish elements often find their way into alt-porn, however, as in the above-mentioned scene from *Naked and Famous*, and BDSM/fetish film is in that sense a major influence on alt.

On the level of production, there are additional intersections between the BDSM/fetish scene and alt-porn. Margie Schnibbe, in suggesting that it is more important that the experience of the sex in her films is “authentic” for the performers, admits that, “maybe that, for me, comes from having worked in an S&M house.”²⁸ Before moving to Los Angeles and subsequently finding her way into the porn industry, Schnibbe had worked as a dominatrix in New York, where she met and collaborated with Maria Beatty, another filmmaker whose work combines elements of fine art, pornography, fetish, and the cinematic avant-garde, on *Let the Punishment Fit the Child* (1997). Like Cheryl Dunye’s *Mommy Is Coming*, *Let the Punishment Fit the Child* explores the mother/daughter incest taboo, with Schnibbe credited as “mommy” and Beatty as “daughter.” Shot in black and white, the film opens with a woman (Beatty), dressed as a young girl in knee-socks, maryjanes, and a schoolgirl uniform, being dragged off by another woman (Schnibbe). Ominous music befitting of a horror film accompanies this image, which soon gives way to a montage of extreme closeups: a woman preparing to unbutton her blouse, applying mascara to her eyelashes, running a hand over a stockinged thigh, long dark nails on black lace.

The music during this montage has shifted to a vaguely disturbing combination of seductive jazz and tinkly children's music, as from a music box.

In the next scene, Beatty's character lights a white candle and runs the flame past a line of baby dolls, illuminating each one briefly – most are mutilated in some way, having been burned, or had limbs or eyes removed, and some are dressed up as adults in leather garb and garish makeup. Images of the dolls are intercut with an extreme closeup of a woman applying lipstick. The horror movie music returns as Schnibbe – wearing a blonde wig, marabou heels, and a slinky bathrobe, which hangs open to reveal a lacy bustier – gazes at herself in a mirror, then abruptly pulls Beatty out from under a nearby bed by the legs. She proceeds to bend her “daughter” over her knee and lift up her skirt. In the scenes that follow, images of the dolls are intercut with images of Schnibbe spanking Beatty with a hairbrush. At one point, we see Beatty stabbing a doll in the eye with a shoe, to the same rhythm as her “mommy” spans her in the shots that are intercut with those of the dolls.

In this way, the film is decidedly sexperimental – a psychosexual exploration of themes of pleasure and danger, childhood trauma and forbidden desire, and the construction of femininity – and also very much a fetish film, distributed as pornography or erotica alongside Beatty's other films. It is released with *Ladies of the Night* (2000), a lesbian vampire fetish film, on the *Fetish Films Volume 2* DVD, distributed by Beatty's Bleu Productions. Among the Bleu Productions catalogue are overtly pornographic films like *Post-Apocalyptic Cowgirls* (2008), a kinky lesbian tryst involving urine play, fisting, bondage, and domination. As in most alt-porn, the performers have piercings and tattoos, and one has bright blue hair, but the film – notwithstanding the occasional artistic flourish, like a lingering closeup of blades of grass – is more or less conventionally shot. All of her films, however, explore transgression in meaningful

ways, be it that of the incest taboo or interspecies romance, or of the dictate that separates BDSM from genital sex.

Despite her roots as a dominatrix and collaborator with Beatty, Schnibbe told me that she accepts that pornography, as a genre and industry, has adopted certain conventions:

There are rules, and I know what the rules are. And once I know what the rules are, I just accept that. I accept the limits – that you’re not gonna have certain things. And once I know that, then at least I know what sort of falls in those parameters. I mean, you can’t have bondage and penetration. Maybe you can now, but at that time, you [couldn’t].²⁹

She added that, in a light BDSM scene in *Honey Bunny*, “We tied the woman to the chair with the streamers, [...] but I think she actually cut them off before she stuck the dildo in.”³⁰ As this anecdote illustrates, alt-porn, as a subgenre, tends to flirt with BDSM themes and images, but regulation has shaped the industry such that, historically, it has rarely allowed for freely articulated or fully developed fetish scenes. The generic conventions of pornography tend to privilege meat shots and money shots over kink or any other alternative forms of sexual expression.

In discussing the BDSM/fetish films that she appeared in before moving on to directing her own work, Julie Simone distinguishes between pornography and BDSM/fetish erotica, partly on the basis of historical divisions between the two, and partly because, to her mind, “porn” refers to something that lacks artistry and is disinterested in women’s pleasure: “I actually haven’t done a lot that would qualify to many as porn [...] Even if there wasn’t nudity or penetration – because back then nobody was doing that [in BDSM/fetish films] – it still felt like porn, because it didn’t look good and it wasn’t about the woman getting anything out of it.”³¹ For her own films, Simone throws caution to the wind by combining kink with hardcore sex, and

in so doing emphasizes the importance of authenticity, a highly prized quality in most forms of pornography, in one sense or another, but especially in alternative pornographies.

Mainstream pornography remains invested in depictions of people who are authentically having sex, at the very least, as discussed in previous chapters, but alt-porn is additionally invested in different forms of authenticity. Alt-porn emphasizes the authenticity of subcultural capital (or “cred”), a term that Sarah Thornton uses to describe the markers of belonging and authenticity shared in club cultures, and to make the case that they constitute taste cultures, despite Jean Baudrillard’s “dismissal of the discotheque as the lowest form of contemporary entertainment.”³² Commercial pornography, maligned as it is, arguably surpasses club cultures in its status as low culture or bad object. Thornton compares club cultures to the art world, in that,

Both conspicuously admire innovative artists, but show disdain for those who have too high a profile as being charlatans or overrated media-sluts. Of course, they differ in many ways. Crucially, rather than the artworld’s dread of “trickle down,” the problem for *underground* subcultures is a popularization by a gushing *up* to the mainstream. [...] Subcultural ideology implicitly gives alternative interpretations and values to young people’s, particularly young men’s, subordinate status [...] Club undergrounds see themselves as renegade cultures opposed to, and continually in flight from, the colonizing co-opting media.³³

This phenomenon is analogous to alt-porn’s relationship to the dominant porn industry, except that fears of colonization by the mainstream are arguably more diffuse and relative, due to the added dimension that all porn positions itself in opposition to a still more mainstream taste culture: Hollywood. In most contexts, porn in general possesses less cultural capital, perhaps,

than any other media form or production culture imaginable, but alt-porn attempts to cash in on its subcultural capital by virtue of its associations with pre-established, transgressive communities and aesthetics.

Artist/pornographers like Margie Schnibbe and Madison Young would seem to occupy both sides of the spectrum of taste cultures that surround the mainstream, and thus to claim both cultural capital (as artists) and subcultural capital (as alt-pornographers), but Schnibbe is quick to differentiate between the art establishment and individual artists: “someone who makes art isn’t necessarily part of the art world.”³⁴ Although some artists, like Jeff Koons, can manage to incorporate pornographic imagery into their work and maintain their cultural caché, the somewhat arbitrary but powerful cultural line between art and pornography – the commonly held idea that, as Linda Williams puts it, “artworks about sex that ‘leave nothing to the imagination’ are inferior as art”³⁵ – can preclude movement between the two worlds. Indeed, such critiques can come from both sides: Scott McGowan specifically criticized alt-porn filmmakers for their art world pretensions when he wrote on eyeonadult.com that, “If people jack off to your art, you’re not the artist you think you are.”³⁶

Nonetheless, for both the art world and the world of alt-porn, authenticity is configured in opposition to notions of mainstream or middlebrow tastes. Alt-porn, specifically, tends to distinguish itself from mainstream porn on the basis of its relationship to Goth and/or punk subcultures, and (as with queer, lesbian/dyke, and feminist pornographies) its inclusion of “real” women, which typically indicates that the performers represent a greater diversity of body types than tends to be on display in mainstream porn. Feona Attwood suggests, following Alan McKee, that

Contemporary porn audiences also draw on these ideas when they discuss the aesthetics of pornography, regardless of whether they prefer texts which privilege fantasy and ideal bodies, or realism and ordinary bodies. In both cases, the notion of quality porn depends on a perceived authenticity of performance demonstrated through its performers' "real enjoyment," "genuine interest," "enthusiasm," and "chemistry."³⁷

For alt-porn producers, the issue of the authenticity of the performers is arguably more complex than it is for those of mainstream porn. Mainstream producers like Dan O'Connell pride themselves on hiring only authentically lesbian and bisexual women with "natural" breasts and no tattoos. Queer porn producers like Courtney Trouble tend to focus on hiring a diverse range of authentically queer performers. Alt-porn producers tend to emphasize their own authenticity as members of a given scene and the performers' authentic edginess; in this latter case, tattoos and other body modifications (though, significantly, breast implants and other more normative forms of plastic surgery typically constitute a notable exception), as signs of subculture, become markers of authenticity.

Alt performer Stoya pointedly remarks in a piece that she penned for *Vice* that, as the article's title declares, in porn, "natural beauty is just a marketing tool."³⁸ She points to the seeming hypocrisy of this, as

This phrase ["all natural"] basically indicates that I have not had breast implants or other obvious plastic surgery. It has absolutely nothing to do with whether I've dyed the hair on my head (yes, multiple times and a variety of colors), [...] the amount of makeup piled on my face, or the degree of Photoshop work that has been done to my photographs. It also ignores the fact that for a decent chunk of my career, I had metal bars through my nipples.³⁹

Here she refers to mainstream porn rhetoric, in which the idea of “all natural” indeed seems arbitrary and functions first and foremost as a marketing tool used for “search-engine optimization.”⁴⁰ As opposed to mainstream porn, however, in alt-porn – including its mainstream incarnations – the idea of “natural” is less important than that of “authentic.” Rather than equating “the real” with “natural” or “untouched,” then, for subcultures that value artistry, alt-porn performers signify as more “real” by virtue of their willingness to turn their bodies into canvases and thus declare their relationship to a particular taste culture. Or, as Feona Atwood puts it, alt porn performers “signify an authenticity derived from a high glamour tradition in which ‘personality’ is indicated through ‘image,’”⁴¹ when that image signifies one’s membership in a particular subcultural scene.

Similarly, though for different reasons, for Julie Simone authenticity is bound up⁴² with performers’ relationship to the real-world BDSM scene. In an interview in the Bonus Features on the *Audition* (2007) DVD, she explains:

Is the BDSM in the movie real? Yes, and I was very insistent upon that. Because the original lead for this movie, Dana DeArmond, who is a great performer – but she wanted to use a different dom. BDSM being real was very important to me. It’s not a sex movie; there’s sex in it, but that’s not what the movie was about. And I wanted somebody who was a lifestyle dom, who knew how to use all the implements, who understood the headspace and what was going on psychologically. So I ended up changing my female lead to Gia, who I had met at a party a few months before. [...] During the shoot, she said when she was growing up, she would watch these shows on TV and the movies, and the women would get kidnapped, and she’d always hoped it would end up like that, but it never did. So it was like a fantasy come true for her.⁴³

So, paradoxically, it is important for Simone that the fantasies being enacted in her films are real, and are really shared by the people enacting them, or that, as she later told me, “Even if they’re not personally into it, at least they’re fine with it.”⁴⁴ Here Simone seemingly collapses two different concepts, that of consent and that of authentic desire. With regard to the former, her insistence upon employing a lifestyle dom has an ethical element, in terms of her labor practices; concerned for her performers’ safety and well-being, she insists on working only with someone who knows how to use “all the implements” and understands the psychological dynamics of the situation.

In that regard, Simone distinguishes between her own work and the BDSM depicted in videos and sites like the much-discussed Kink.com:

A lot of the sites like Kink.com, it’s like, those girls are doing it because their agents are making them. Most of them aren’t into it at all. Ninety percent of those girls probably have no training. They give them the weapons to hit this guy and they’re hitting him in the kidneys, showing all kinds of unsafe play.⁴⁵

In her own work, on the other hand, she explains that she is concerned with performer safety, as well as in depicting the BDSM scene/lifestyle realistically, so as to promote safe, consensual play among viewers.

Meanwhile, as we shall see, Kink.com makes its own claims for authenticity. *Kink* recently received a fair amount of academic attention via an article in *n+1*, in which Emily Witt writes about her experience attending a taping of *Public Disgrace*, “an online pornography series that advertises itself as ‘women bound, stripped, and punished in public,’” and was founded by Princess Donna, a popular dominatrix and porn director.⁴⁶ Donna runs the shoots, which

typically feature a male dom, but they also involve audience participation. As Witt describes them, her production practices align in some ways with those of feminist pornographers:

Before each shoot, Princess Donna coordinates with the female lead to establish what she likes or doesn't like and produces a checklist of what the performer will take from her civilian audience. Some models are happy only with groping, some have rules against slapping, and some are willing to go so far as to be fingered or spit on by the audience.⁴⁷

So she is evidently concerned with ensuring consent and establishing boundaries, and with helping performers to explore their supposedly authentic desires.

In a sense, *Public Disgrace* calls to mind feminist performance art works like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965) and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974) in which audience members were encouraged to physically engage with the artist/subject. In Ono's piece, audience members were instructed to cut a piece from the clothing that she was wearing, until she was left sitting in the middle of the floor in her underwear. For Abramovic's, audiences were encouraged to use any of seventy-two different tools, including a knife, a whip, a rose, sugar, scissors, honey, and a gun with a single bullet, on her body. Over the course of six hours, she was "alternately abused and defended by the participants, and eventually – after being drawn on, kissed, fed, soaked in water, stripped, and cut – a fight broke out after one participant loaded the pistol, placed it in her hand, and aimed it at her neck."⁴⁸ According to the Marina Abramovic Institute, the piece ultimately reveals "the varying natures, both supportive and vindictive, hidden under the surface of a normally passive art audience."⁴⁹ In both cases, the artists made themselves vulnerable in order to convey powerful messages about gendered power dynamics. Ono's near-naked body and Abramovic's battered figure, in the end, each stand as an indictment of the ways in which individual women are routinely objectified and subjected to sexual violence, and of the various

forms of biopower and ownership exerted over women's bodies in various public and private contexts.

Audience participation in both cases serves a dual function: something like sociological research in the manner of the famous Stanley Milgram experiments on obedience to authority (which demonstrated ordinary citizens' willingness to harm strangers), and also a democratization of the art-making process.⁵⁰ In the words of Adrienne Rich, "Like government, art needs the participation of the many in order not to become the property of a powerful and narrowly self-interested few," and both Ono and Abramovic, as well as Princess Donna, enable the participation of non-artists, thereby expanding access to a space of cultural capital on the one hand and subcultural capital on the other.⁵¹ Two major differences between these performance art pieces and the Kink.com scenes, of course, are that, in *Public Disgrace*, the artist is not the one exposing herself to audience interaction, and that the primary functions of those shoots are commercial rather than artistic or political.

Also, unlike Ono and Abramovic, Princess Donna laid down specific ground rules about interacting with Penny Pax, the submissive performer: "You're allowed to spit on her chest but not her face. You can give her a hard spanking but you are not allowed to give her a hard smack."⁵² She demonstrated "a reasonable distance from which to spank her."⁵³ There is also an additional layer of performance to *Public Disgrace*, in that each shoot is "supposed to seem spontaneous," and the audience participants (though actually solicited in advance on the site) are supposed to seem like casual bystanders who become swept up in the scene.⁵⁴ In the middle of the scene, after about twenty minutes, Princess Donna calls for a break, which is edited out of the video of the scene on Kink.com. So unlike *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0*, which actually were spontaneous in terms of the interactions depicted but took place in a space that was delineated in

advance as one of performance, *Public Disgrace* is a performance masquerading as spontaneous reality.

This particular shoot for *Public Disgrace* features two performers – Penny, as well as a man, Ramon Nomar, who eventually dominates and penetrates her – who “usually work in mainstream porn in San Fernando Valley, but enjoy coming to San Francisco.”⁵⁵ In this way, Emily Witt distinguishes between “mainstream porn” and Kink.com, presumably on the basis of Kink’s status as a fetish/BDSM site, but specifically by virtue of its geography: its headquarters and most of its shoots are located not in the Valley, but in San Francisco. The site takes care to brand itself as progressive and pro-sex:

Kink.com’s mission is to create the most authentic BDSM experiences that foster community and empower people to explore their sexuality. The company was started in 1997, by bondage enthusiast Peter Acworth. After launching his first website – Hogtied.com – and running it from his graduate school dorm for a full year, Peter moved the company to San Francisco, where it has continued to grow into the world’s most recognized and respected company promoting the acceptance of human sexuality.⁵⁶

In a few short sentences, the site thus manages to position itself as a powerful community resource for sexual empowerment; to assert its relationship to the “authentic” BDSM lifestyle and to the academy, by virtue of its founding by a “bondage enthusiast” who was in graduate school; and to proclaim itself “the most recognized and respected company promoting the acceptance of human sexuality.”

Although the latter would be an inflated claim even if it were to specify “porn company,” Acworth nonetheless fancies himself an activist as well as a pornographer, who has “devoted himself to demystifying BDSM for those outside the lifestyle and protecting those within it,” and

Kink has become known for its “tough ethical standards in its lists of models’ rights and shooting rules.”⁵⁷ His positioning of Kink.com as a sort of spokes-site for a transgressive subculture is bound up with his community ties: “his talent pool and many production personnel are drawn from the San Francisco and broader BDSM community of which he has personally been a member for many years.”⁵⁸ As far as production practices, pre- and post-shoot interviews with the performers accompany most videos on Kink.com in order to demonstrate (and implicitly advocate) consent, and the site is known for hiring women directors. Through its activist stance, the site locates authenticity in the performers (and/or directors) having had real-world experience with BDSM as a sexual practice or a lifestyle, or at least in their genuine desire to explore BDSM. Meanwhile, the site’s claims about its production practices focus on highlighting the performative nature of the scenes.

In recent years, *Kink*’s ethics have come under fire for several reasons: Acworth’s arrest for cocaine possession, an abrupt lowering of its cam girls’ pay rates in 2012, and allegations from former models that they were denied workers’ compensation after being injured on *Kink* sets. One of these performers “further states she was coerced into a performance that left her with long-lasting injuries and was offered money in exchange for keeping quiet about those injuries.”⁵⁹ In the wake of these criticisms, Princess Donna and performer/director Lorelei Lee have spoken out in defense of the site, with Donna arguing that “Kink is probably one of the only places that asks you what you want to do or not do explicitly before the scene occurs,” and Lee claiming that, on any given shoot, everyone who works for the site “knows that it is their responsibility to care for the model’s emotional and physical safety above all else.”⁶⁰ In this way, like many of the mainstream filmmakers whom I interviewed, Donna positions exploitation as occurring “elsewhere” and *Kink* as an exception to the rule.

Despite its attempts to brand itself as alternative, Kink.com is also invested in the mainstreaming of BDSM. Acworth thus attempts to cash in on Kink's subcultural capital as a site for the showcasing of transgressive, marginal sex practices, even as his larger goal is to achieve "a broader acceptance of BDSM by mainstream society."⁶¹ Acworth's company has grown into a commercial network of BDSM/fetish sites, including *Fucking Machines*, collected under the corporate name of Kink.com (formerly Cybernet Entertainment, Inc.). As Darren Roberts, former CEO and co-founder of AVN (Adult Video News) Media Network, suggests, "Many of the practices employed at Kink.com mirror the values and missions of mainstream companies featured in publications like *Fast Money* and *Inc.* [...] In turn, Kink.com's policies encourage greater acceptance of the company by mainstream markets."⁶²

Unlike most mainstream companies in the adult video industry, however, *Kink* has remained resolutely online only, probably by virtue of its still controversial content:

Kink.com has always stayed on the Internet side of things, thus simplifying the business and reducing its legal exposure: Being strictly web-based, the company doesn't have to negotiate DVD distribution or send physical products across state lines. In terms of the "community standards" prong of the Miller Test for obscenity, Acworth feels the network of websites is relatively safe in San Francisco, where the BDSM community has long been an accepted part of the larger society.⁶³

In this sense, Kink.com straddles the line between mainstream and alt. Based in San Francisco, the home to queer porn production, and eschewing DVD distribution, the site aligns itself with alternative pornographies; but it is nonetheless the site that independent filmmakers like Julie Simone point to as mainstream in order to differentiate their own work. Additionally, the site has always maintained an interest in breaking through to "mainstream markets." According to

Madison Young, the recent industry shifts that have allowed for the combination of BDSM and hardcore sex can be attributed almost singlehandedly to Kink.com: when they launched their *Sex and Submission* series, that “changed a lot of things within the BDSM industry. It used to be very separate. For years, I was simply a bondage model, and that word I think dates me greatly now, [...] to think that sex and bondage at one point did not go together, but at one point they didn’t.”⁶⁴

Unlike Peter Acworth, who sought a Ph.D. in Finance at Columbia University (and left the program after his first year), both Eon McKai and Madison Young attended art school before entering into the production of pornography. Although Acworth’s pornography is not overtly political, nor concerned with art as a concept or value system, he is implicitly dedicated to activism, and sees his websites as part of a broader project to destigmatize minority sexual practices that fall under the umbrella of BDSM/fetish. Both McKai and Young are invested in exploring the spaces where art and pornography coexist, but Young’s pornography is distinctly and overtly queer and feminist in a way that McKai’s, and most other alt-porn, is not. For Young, ethical BDSM praxis involves “a safe space compiled of our mutual fantasies” and “deconstructing any patriarchal or hierarchical structures and power dynamics that might exist within our everyday lives and stepping into another world.”⁶⁵ By self-consciously marking off BDSM scenes within a space of fantasy – “stepping into another world” – Young’s work often involves critical arousal, to feminist ends. While McKai’s films also often generate critical arousal through self-reflexive strategies, it is not necessarily in service of “deconstructing any patriarchal or hierarchical structures and power dynamics.”

A close examination of two alt-porn videos – McKai’s *Art School Sluts* (2004) and Young’s *Art House Sluts* (2010) – that foreground art in their strikingly similar titles as well as in

their profilmic qualities, will illuminate both the intersections and the useful distinctions between mainstream alt and queer alt. McKai's film marks, as mentioned above, the mainstream industry's first major foray into alt-porn. Backed by VCA Pictures, where he had been working in an office job after graduate school, McKai made a film that reflected his own tastes and asserted the authenticity of his interests in marginal subcultures: "You have to live it to make it. You have to acutely be attracted to that type of girl and be active in the scene."⁶⁶ His nom de porn itself reflects his relationship to "the scene" by paying homage to Ian MacKaye, the musician (and producer and label owner) most famous for being the frontman for hardcore punk band Minor Threat and post-hardcore band Fugazi.

His first film, *Art School Sluts*, adopts a lo-fi analog video aesthetic, and the art direction and performers proclaim its status as alternative. Following a girl/girl sex scene, seemingly a dream sequence evoking David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) through its eroticization of a car crash, we are introduced to the main character, Mia ("real life Goth girl Keiko"⁶⁷), a woman with dark hair in pigtails, wearing a choker and very dark lipstick and eye makeup, in a bedroom filled with stuffed teddy bears hanging by strings from the ceiling, and otherwise mostly empty aside from the bed on which she lies and an extremely dirty mirror. She approaches the mirror, and a slow motion shot of her opening her eyes, while staring directly into the camera after applying still more eye makeup, immediately calls attention to the film's artifice as well as its artistry. This form of self-consciousness is rather different from the gonzo porn convention in which the performer looks at or talks to the camera; in that case, she does so because she is going to have sex with the man holding the camera, and she is speaking to him. That convention allows the viewer to stand in for the cameraman, to feel as though she is talking to him. The direct address to the camera in *Art House Sluts* is something else entirely. The slow motion,

combined with her returning our gaze so pointedly and aggressively, and with the clearly unnecessary action of applying additional eye makeup, functions reflexively, encouraging the viewer to engage with the film on a level beyond that of sheer pornographic fantasy. The application of makeup, as a self-conscious acknowledgment of porn's construction of (gendered) fantasy, is also bound up with notions of authenticity in alt contexts, as a visual marker (along with hairstyle, clothing, accessories, and body modifications) of subcultural belonging. It invites us in to see the man behind the curtain, even as – in so doing – it reaffirms both man and curtain as “authentically” alternative.

This first scene also immediately establishes a link between art and pornography. In a whispered voiceover, the performer introduces herself: “My name’s Mia. On days when I feel like it, I go to art school. Every single person in my classroom is a fucking pervert.” In the next scene, when she enters the classroom, she specifically mentions (again in voiceover), “Our teacher, Mister Davis, is both a hack and a pervert.” As she speaks these words, there is a cut to a closeup of the teacher (Kyle Stone), licking his lips lasciviously while looking directly at the camera. This direct address goes even further than the first, when we consider that the primary market for a VCA title is straight males. Something of an assault on the audience, this reversal of voyeurism through aggressive direct address produces discomfort by making us feel like the target of the teacher’s libidinous gaze, evoking the type of textual strategy used by Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) in which characters yell racial slurs to the camera/viewer, and *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), in which characters rattle off cheesy and often misogynistic pickup lines to the camera/viewer.

In a later scene, we watch an uncredited actress wait as a boom mic is adjusted. The art teacher tells her that she has “very interesting bone structure,” and he’d like to photograph her

sometime – thus using the rhetoric of art to euphemize pornographic desire. She replies by asking if she is making him hot; he merely licks his lips salaciously again without replying, but in a voiceover, we hear him say, “Very.” She tosses off, “fucking pervert,” at him, as she turns and walks away. The overtly self-conscious acknowledgement of the cinematic apparatus (i.e. the boom mic), the nonsynchronous sound, and the female character’s rejection of the teacher’s advances – an unusual circumstance indeed in a porno movie!⁶⁸ – together function to generate critical arousal, by precluding the viewer’s thoughtless escape into a pornographic reverie, and to assert the female character’s personality as separate from and beyond her status as facilitator of male desire.

In a later scene, this self-reflexivity is taken even further. A student with a long, red-tinted Mohawk (played by an uncredited male performer), perhaps in a parody of academic porn studies, gives an awkwardly vapid presentation about condom use in the porn industry, including lines about how the strap-on’s function is “keeping a man’s penis at a distance.” The students roll their eyes and otherwise mime boredom and skepticism. In the scene that follows, we watch as he meets a woman (Brooklyn) online and invites her over for sex. She asks him, “What’s that dog on your wall about?” He reads his reply directly from a script, and both performers laugh intermittently during the dialogue exchange that follows. He describes himself as an “S&M performance artist,” and next to the giant picture of a dog about which his partner asked, we can see pieces of paper reading, “PUNK,” “DISCOURSE... IS DEAD,” AND “SUPEREGO.” The combination of words evokes the anti-conformist ideals central to alt-porn: “punk” clearly relates to the film’s primary subcultural antecedent in addition to evoking a general sense of transgression, while “discourse... is dead” suggests a lack of meaningful conversation in a polarized culture (one that, for instance, erects barriers between mainstream and alternative,

acceptable and unacceptable), and “superego” refers to Sigmund Freud’s conception of that part of the psychiatric apparatus responsible for the internalization of cultural rules and mores, including those that alt-porn seeks to mock or challenge.

The dialogue is shot with a handheld camera that moves around the scene erratically, further emphasizing the film’s DIY ethos. Suddenly, referring to the script, Brooklyn turns directly to the camera and says, “It says, ‘cut to’... Do you want me to start over?” Although the film is clearly operating on one level as a satire of art world and hipster pretensions, on another level the workings of porn production are entirely laid bare for us. In comparison to Hollywood filmmaking, even commercial pornography involves a DIY element. It tends to be made extremely quickly – in the space of a few hours or a few days – and performers usually do not get scripts in advance; they need to memorize or improvise their lines on the fly. Commercial porn does not generally acknowledge this fact within its diegesis, however, and the reflexivity here, by exposing the mechanisms of the film’s creation, works to convey a punk, antiestablishment ethos. In *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*, Stacey Thompson argues that, “A loose sense of DIY has been with punk since the beginning,” as well as a valuation of gritty, amateurish, and unpolished style.⁶⁹ Although technically a mainstream product, *Art School Sluts* evokes and clearly prides itself on its punk ethos and aesthetic, and manages to differentiate itself from the vast majority of mainstream pornography in the process.

This cinematic self-consciousness is pushed further still, and to porn-specific ends, when, after tying up his partner using Shibari (Japanese rope bondage) techniques, verbally and physically dominating her (e.g. by spitting into her mouth), and manually stimulating her vulva, suddenly the Mohawk-ed performer disappears from the scene. He unties Brooklyn, thereby establishing the aforementioned boundary between BDSM/fetish and hardcore porn, and then

there is an abrupt cut to a different, conventional looking male performer (Talon), who announces that he is “gonna fuck this girl instead,” because the other performer’s “test didn’t come back.” Combined with the unnamed performer’s earlier presentation on condom use in porn, this provides a pointed commentary on industry practice; specifically the avoidance of condom usage in most studios’ productions. Partly as a result of the historical resistance to condom usage, industry self-regulation has required that if a performer’s STI test results cannot be confirmed, the performer cannot engage in penetration, and in the middle of a sex scene, McKai chooses to allow his performers to acknowledge this.⁷⁰

Madison Young’s more recent film, *Art House Sluts* (2010), similarly lampoons the art world, but her target is the (queer) establishment, rather than art students. Acknowledging the film’s artistic pretensions as well, the *Adult DVD Marketplace* description reads, “one of the most avant garde and visceral lesbian features of the decade.”⁷¹ The film opens with Young, as “Maddie,” sitting on the side of the road, beside a sign that offers “original art” for \$20. The first sex scene occurs when she leaves her post to grab a burrito and then detours into a bathroom for a solo session. After urinating, she begins to masturbate through a hole in her fishnets, while sitting on the toilet:



Fig. 4.4: Madison Young masturbating in *Art House Sluts*

The toilet in the masturbation scene here functions similarly to the mirror in *Art School Sluts* – the women who use them appear gritty and tough by virtue of their association with dirty, grimy objects. And as with *Art School Sluts*, the film is immediately marked off as alternative by way of its alt-rock soundtrack and the performers' wardrobes (here, the punk/riot grrrl staple: ripped fishnets), and although the stylistic flourishes in this film are both less frequent and less obviously self-conscious than those of McKai's, it nonetheless utilizes a variety of experimental processes and techniques.

During the masturbation scene, the film switches back and forth between black and white and color. Several times, there is an abrupt transition to what looks like 16mm film images (though they are probably created through video effects), in which Young is wearing a vintage dress and riding a bike and/or walking around outdoors. Twice, as she walks past a fence, we can see flames rising up from the yard on the far side. Shots of her inserting a dildo into her ass are intercut with heavily processed images of a person lighting a match and more shots of the flames in the yard. This seems to constitute a visually poetic, if somewhat heavy-handed, way of conveying that the scene is heating up for her. Yet Young frequently employs the auto-pornographic by incorporating her autobiography into her porn work, and the scene may therefore also function as a personal flashback of sorts. Flames can, after all, easily represent danger as well as passion or beauty, and Young is not one to shy away from acknowledging connections between pain and pleasure, trauma and sexuality. Later in the film she will reveal aspects of her youth that she repeats as fact in her recently published memoir, *Daddy* (Rare Bird Books, 2013).

But first, back on the street to sell her art, she is approached by a stranger in Warhol drag. "Andie" (Sadie Lune) buys some of her art pieces, and then brings her back to "The Art House."

Andie invites Maddie to watch a performance, in which a genderqueer performer, Jiz Lee, and a butch boi⁷², Sid Blakovich, both wearing elaborate bleached-blond wigs, engage in a variety of theatrical sex acts. It begins when Blakovich fellates a hot dog peeking out of Lee's underwear. Then Blakovich cuts Lee's hair, in a scene that (intentionally or otherwise) evokes MM Serra and Maria Beatty's experimental fetish film, *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One*, in which a dominatrix cuts Beatty's bleached-blond wig. Then Lee pulls Blakovich's underwear down, and she is revealed to have a hotdog in there as well; Lee fellates it, after placing sliced deli meat over her crotch like a dental dam. They have sex in a variety of positions, often involving deli meat, while Andie watches, seemingly bored and eating a banana (in a nod to the famous Velvet Underground & Nico album cover designed by Warhol), and the image moves through a variety of different processes and effects: black and white solarization, vintage-looking cross-processing, and various types of filters and lighting arrangements.

This scene is decidedly queer, in both the performers' gender presentations – genderqueer and boi, respectively, but with both putting on and taking off high femme drag in the course of the scene – and in the sex acts performed, which involve (among other things) hot dogs as detachable phalluses, and a repeated switching of the power dynamics, from bottom to top and back again. This is perhaps the most important way in which *Art House Sluts* differs from *Art School Sluts*. The film is not only alt but also queer, and thus it moves beyond Feona Attwood's elaboration of alt-porn as that in which "a system of aesthetics is evoked as a form of ethics."⁷³ In most alt-porn, as Attwood suggests, the aesthetics of the sets and performers, by marking the films off as different from the mainstream, stand in for an anti-establishment ethos. Queer porn, however, typically involves an investment in other, more overt politics. *Art School Sluts* may involve more formal cinematic experimentation, but *Art House Sluts* incorporates far more

sexual experimentation. The sex scenes in the former are fairly conventional, while the latter is interested in shaking up the establishment in more meaningful ways, by emphasizing the performativity and limitless possibilities of gender expression, and by suggesting ways in which art making can function as activist practice.

In a later scene, Maddie sips Campbell's soup through a straw, directly from the can. That, along with the conspicuous eating of the banana and the overall character of Andie, combine to paint a playful parody of Warhol's Factory and to communicate the film's preoccupation with art praxis and queer politics. Andy Warhol is, of course, a queer icon, but Barbara Rubin, the director of perhaps the first publicly exhibited film to include a money shot, *Christmas on Earth*, was also a member of the Factory. Whether Young or her performers know it or not, their homage to the Factory is also an homage to a woman sexperimental filmmaker who paved the way for women and queer filmmakers' sexually explicit cultural production. As Joseph Klarl for *The Brooklyn Rail* puts it, Rubin's "on-screen spectacle illuminates the path for film installation, goofy and explicit art films like Warhol's *Taylor Mead's Ass*, New Queer Cinema, and, divisively, today's perpetual hard core pornography."⁷⁴ The further queering of Andy Warhol, as "Andie," a woman in drag, could function as a subtle reminder of women's contributions to historical male-dominated traditions.

Later in the film, Young lies in a bed with Blakovich as Andie films them, in a scene that fully integrates the auto-pornographic by combining the interview/confessional mode with sex. It begins with a slightly surreal declaration by Young: "Why am I here? I'm here because I don't want to be there, silly!" but she goes on to explain that, "This is exactly what I hoped a home would always be: full of sex and art and creative energy." From there, Maddie/Young begins to talk about her (real) life:

My parents divorced when I was four. [...] My father would come over on the weekends; he'd smell like grass and leaves and licorice. I never wanted him to leave. I would cry and beg for him to stay. I was daddy's little girl. I wanted to go to art school so bad. [...] It was my way out of suburban hell. [...] Find my way to the queers and beats, where I belonged.

In one fell swoop, this monologue evokes a sense of the importance of queer and artist communities, and penetrates the fantasy of mainstream pornography. By connecting her personal and sexual identity to childhood trauma, this film acknowledges and pays tribute to a form of affect that is routinely avoided in commercial pornography. As Courtney Trouble puts it, "porn stars aren't supposed to talk about this, because it reaffirms every fucked up sexist, classist stigma against us. We are victims, our families abandoned us, we are broken, we are seeking love in all the wrong places, and for that we are second class citizens."⁷⁵ In her memoir and elsewhere, however, Young has spoken of the trauma that she experienced when her father left her family at age four, and in this way, the scene also effectively blurs the line between fantasy and reality. Evoking the reflexive autobiographical strategies of Cheryl Dunye in *The Watermelon Woman* and her (s)experimental "Dunyementaries,"⁷⁶ *Art House Sluts* involves a movement between and among various identities – Maddie the character, Madison Young the performer, and Madison Young the director – and in this scene, they become momentarily inextricable.

In the midst of this interview scene, Maddie suddenly becomes offended: "I don't want to talk about it. [...] Why don't you want to hear about my art? Why aren't you asking me questions about that?" The hostility disappears almost as quickly as it emerged, and the scene transitions into sex. The significance of these lines become clear by the end of the film, after

Andie is revealed to be a manipulator who uses artists for his/her own ends. In the final scene, we get a glimpse of Madison Young's actual gallery storefront, Femina Potens, as she explains in a voiceover that she has moved on to do her own thing. In light of this declaration, her earlier questions posed to Andie, about the seeming lack of interest in her art, seem directed at the viewer, as a gentle reminder that her work and identity as an artist are at least as important as her work as a pornographer and performer.

Among the closing credits is an additional appeal, to "visit www.feminapotens.org to support queer art," and an acknowledgment of feminist and queer activists, artists, and pornographers, like Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, and "all of the revolutionaries who have cum before us." In this way, the film – distributed as lesbian pornography on mainstream sites like *Adult DVD Marketplace* – strongly affirms the links between pornography and feminist and queer art production, and positions Young within a sex worker activist tradition. Significantly, like Annie Sprinkle, Young does not see the utility in separating out the activist and art traditions from the pornographic, and chooses instead to envision them all as part of one complex herstory.

Kimberly Kane's work similarly complicates the indie/good and mainstream/bad binary, and shares several qualities with queer and feminist porn. Her film *My Own Master* (2010) occupies the line between queer and alt, produced for a queer/feminist company, Good Vibrations' Heartcore Films, but created with the signature alt style that she developed through directing several films for Vivid and Vivid-ALT. Like her other films, *My Own Master* involves the mixing of several different video formats and processes, as well as meticulous art direction. The film opens with a shot of an old wood-framed CRT television displaying blue static, which then briefly bleeds out of the frame within a frame to saturate the overall image via superimposition. In a series of intercut, tightly framed images, glimpses of different parts of her

body are revealed to us: her face as she smokes a cigarette and seems to meet our gaze head-on, her hand stroking one of her breasts, her crotch clad in men's "tightie whities" underwear. Taken together, these images combine toughness with femininity and thereby gently challenge and queer the gendered conventions of contemporary pornography.

An indie rock song plays in the background, as she begins to masturbate over her underwear, still smoking and wearing little else, aside from a denim jacket, black biker boots, a sailor's cap, and an ironic collar emblazoned with "HIPSTER." She beckons us closer with her hands, but in an instant, as they walk into the frame from behind the fourth wall – shattering it in the process – we realize that it is not us but two male performers (Danny Wylde and Wolf Hudson) whom she has beckoned. They both caress her and then one makes out with her, and she moans in ecstasy, seemingly unable to believe her own good fortune: "fuuuuuck." She alternates between handjobs and blowjobs on both men, and tells them, "Both you guys are so beautiful." The men then violate perhaps the last taboo of mainstream porn when they kiss each other as she attends to their erections; their penises briefly touch in her mouth.⁷⁷ Both performers, as openly bisexual men, have achieved popularity in the world of queer porn, though – like Kane – they have moved back and forth between queer/indie/gay and mainstream porn production. If alt is "authentic" partly to the extent that it succeeds in being transgressive (and thus oppositional to the mainstream), then the queerness of this scene serves to validate the film in that regard.

The scene that follows enacts a playful BDSM scenario. Shot mostly in black and white, it features a scantily clad maid (Avy Scott) cleaning a kitchen with an ironically old-timey elevator music soundtrack. Kimberly enters, dressed like a fetish fairy godmother in a black Goth ballgown, and demands: "What are you doing, slave?" She proceeds to berate Scott for

doing a poor job of cleaning, but as she slaps and insults her, the hint of a smile creeps in several times, and it is immensely clear that both women are enjoying themselves. At one point, Kimberly says, “If it wasn’t for your ass, you’d be completely worthless to me,” and the slave smiles broadly in response. The power dynamics shift here and there, as when Kimberly asks, “Do you mind if I paw at your assets while you scrub my floor, slave?” “Please do!” she replies. They take turns performing oral sex and ATM (“ass to mouth,” in the industry lingo), occasionally laughing and playfully exchanging dialogue, such that the sex feels spontaneous and improvised, despite the highly stylized nature of the mise-en-scene and video processing – as when Scott begins to hump Kimberly, and she says, as if she had expected something else but is happy to go with the flow, “Oh, you just want to hump? Go for it.”

In this way, *My Own Master*, as the title suggests, works to convey a sex-positive, woman-centric vision, and although Kimberly Kane does not necessarily identify as feminist or queer, her work can thus be compared to Madison Young’s queer alt work. In an anecdote that illustrates a shared perspective among the two women, Young and Kane shot a scene together for HBO’s *Real Sex*, and as Young explains it, they did so by invitation of HBO, who claimed that they were only interested in documenting the scene, which the women would be free to direct according to their own desires and inspirations. They shot two versions of the scene; one softcore for HBO, and the other hardcore for Young’s production company. Both Kane and Young are open about enjoying power exchanges, varying amounts of BDSM, and rough play. As it happens, HBO was unhappy with the scene, because they had apparently expected it to be “soft, more feminine,” but Kane was quick to declare, “Yeah... That’s not how I fuck.”⁷⁸

Young cites this as an example of the “need to negotiate on the fly and to be an aggressive communicator,” and admits to being grateful that Kane had been able to do so for the

both of them, because she had been caught off-guard by HBO's complaints.⁷⁹ In the end, she insists that "that's how you stay feminist within a non-feminist space," something which Young finds herself having to negotiate fairly regularly, as she works in the mainstream industry as well as in alternative, queer, and feminist porn. When I asked her if she identifies as feminist, Kane told me,

I have won a Feminist Porn Award [for *My Own Master*]. [...] Maybe a woman running her own business and not being exploited kind of thing is feminist, but as far as my porn, yeah I'm a woman [...] I'm just very strong-willed and very bossy, and I just want to make good art. So if that's feminist, put the label on it, but I'm not a feminist.⁸⁰

In this way, Kane prioritizes art over politics and privileges a more neoliberal vision of individual success, but acknowledges that her prowess as a businesswoman could itself be perceived as a feminist phenomenon and that her work has been recognized as conveying feminist ideals.

The significance of McKai's, Young's, and Kane's art- and community-centric alt visions is thrown into relief through comparison to another aesthetically-motivated tradition, but one which is firmly rooted within the mainstream: artcore (also known as glamcore or art porn). Sophie Delancey, a PR person for several independent porn websites, told me that "art porn is the moniker that would be used" to market a subgenre of porn featuring

Women between the ages of 20 and 26, [...] usually shot somewhere vaguely beachy, and they have the sort of one to two camera DSLR shot, and it's soft sex. [...] And a lot of them are being bought out by a couple different companies, but the company that owns MetArt has been kind of getting them all together. [...] But I think it's really just, it's stretched out to mean stuff shot with nice cameras. There are definitely some people –

companies – that are on the fringe, but in general, it's come to mean glamorous, thin women having a certain type of sex shot by a certain type of camera.⁸¹

Although this is a distinctly mainstream phenomenon, promoted by sites and producers that do not necessarily use feminist or even nonsexist business practices, corporate sites like Pornhub, “which is in bed with a lot of these big artcore companies, because they make them a lot of money, will tag these as female-friendly, as porn for women.”⁸² Because people tend to conflate the categories of “porn for women,” “porn by women,” and “feminist porn,” in Delancey’s words, “a lot of people assume it [“female-friendly”] means feminist. I mean, ‘porn for women’ is just some dudes in a room who decided, ‘Yeah, women probably like this.’”⁸³

Further complicating this idea is the fact that overtly feminist filmmaker Petra Joy, who is based in Germany but whose films are distributed in the US through Candida Royalle’s Femme Productions, says, “I do call my films art-core rather than hardcore. Even though I do feature erections, penetration and show ‘real sex,’ I do not feel I have much in common with 90% of films in the genre of hard-core porn. I am an artist and enjoy making sensuality the subject of my visual experimental art.”⁸⁴ Ironically, Joy’s (and others’) insistence on distinguishing their own work from pornography by using another term, such as “art-core,” in fact makes it easier for the mainstream to co-opt their rhetoric and commodify their style, and pass themselves off as feminist.

Delancey told me that sometimes even the feminist porn establishment can be duped by these tactics. Dane Jones, of DaneJones.com (a rebranding of Orgasms.xxx), who was involved with some of the “shadiest business practices in the world”⁸⁵ via his buying up of several .xxx domains,⁸⁶ applied for a Feminist Porn Award... And won. As Delancey puts it, “if you have this aesthetic, people infer things about the politics behind it.”⁸⁷ Thus, by co-opting the feminist

rhetoric and label, some examples of artcore go a step well beyond alt-porn in attempting to evoke a system of aesthetics as a form of ethics. In this way, cynical market logic subsumes feminist politics:

So there's just a tremendous amount of confusion about labeling, and it goes without saying that the people who are benefiting from this are happy for this to be as nebulous as possible, and to say, "Yeah, sure, we're feminist" when pushed against the wall if it'll make them money.⁸⁸

Even the most apolitical variants of alt-porn are defined through some sense of a broader community, via their associations with subcultures. Art porn, on the other hand, does not typically encompass alternative aesthetics or ideologies. One could argue that art porn's aesthetics differ somewhat from the mainstream – certainly from subgenres like gonzo – but they merely reproduce the aesthetics of softcore pornography. The “art” in art porn merely signifies that it features high production values, rather than artistic innovation or experimentation.

Although she is routinely cited as one of the subgenre's originators, Joanna Angel's films provide perhaps the clearest example of those that appropriate only the most superficial elements of artistry or alternative subcultures. This is not a critique of Angel's identity or “cred”; tattooed and pierced, her personal style seems to align with that of the Goth and punk subcultures that alt most often gestures toward. And her taste in music is no doubt reflected in her films, as in the use of one of Har Mar Superstar's songs in *Joanna's Angels 2: Alt.Throttle* (2005). Beyond the wardrobe, soundtrack, and occasional setting (as when a sex scene occurs in a record shop), however, there is little about the film that could be described as alternative. The framing, editing, lighting, and so on are all fairly straightforward and conventional. Every scene involving a man (which is nearly all of them) ends with a facial cum shot. The film's narrative,

tongue held firmly in cheek, centers around a blonde woman – standing in for all things mainstream and conventional – who kidnaps the president’s daughter and holds her for ransom “until everything alt is outlawed.” According to the DVD cover and other marketing materials, “If Joanna and her angels don’t act quickly, they risk being subjected to a lifetime of conformity.”⁸⁹

The dominant tone of the film is comedic, and Angel suggests that that is what distinguishes her porn:

I think our sense of humor is pretty unique. [...] A lot of people in porn, and then a lot of people in alt-porn, they just take themselves so seriously. And I think a lot of the reason why a lot of the people in the alt-porn world don’t really like us that much is because we’ve never been a rebellion against mainstream porn. We were never trying to bring down the industry in porn, and I don’t know, I think for some reason, alt-porn became known as this genre of porn where it’s more about the art than the porn. And we’ve never been like that. I didn’t go to art school.⁹⁰

Art and aesthetics are, for Angel, beside the point. And yet, although she insists that her work has never “been a rebellion against mainstream porn,” she clearly sees what she does as different. In *Joanna’s Angels 2*, her character (also named Joanna), says, upon learning about the villain’s nefarious plan, “This is a classic case of a girl with blonde hair and really bad taste in music!” This functions at once as a parody of the pride in their outsider status that members of alternative subcultures tend to exhibit, and – in a movie filled with dark-haired, tattooed, pierced women – an actual affirmation of their “authentic” outsider status.

One aspect that Angel’s porn does have in common with Kane’s, Young’s, and Vena Virago’s (née Margie Schnibbe) is its unfetishized depictions of what would otherwise be

marked off as “interracial” sex in mainstream porn. In all of the videos that I have discussed above, as well as in Young’s *Thin Line Between Art and Sex* (2010), when a black man engages in sex with a white woman, the only signifiers of racial difference are the visible differences in skin tone. As elaborated in Chapter 2, the marketing rhetoric used to describe most contemporary “interracial” (which, in industry parlance, only applies to scenes featuring black men and white women) and “ethnic” (i.e. everything else featuring performers of color) porn is typically fetishistic and often downright racist, even when the couplings that it describes are entirely banal. This is often true of the dialogue in porn scenes as well. As Linda Williams suggests, “In contemporary video pornography, the pleasures of sexual-racial difference once the province of white masters have become commodified, mediated, available to all. Not unexpectedly, the power differentials of that original relation inform them.”⁹¹

In alt-porn, by contrast, racial difference typically goes entirely unremarked upon. Margie Schnibbe suggests that the fetishization is largely tied to market imperatives:

There’s this interracial thing, the way they market porn, and at that time [in 2006], I was told that, if you have black men, then they do scenes with white women, but then you can’t have black women doing scenes with white men, because then it’s a different market, in how they sell it. [...] But in something under the “alternative” label, you can kind of do what you want in that sense.

Here she implies that market imperatives – and specifically distributors’ assumptions regarding a lack of overlap among niche audiences – rather than a fundamental racism have come to structure the industry’s racialization practices. Certainly the systemic racism that has led to the devaluing of black performers’ labor is a relevant factor as well, but producers and distributors do tend to base their marketing and production decisions on assumptions (however misguided, in

some cases) about what sells where. The significant point here is that alt-porn allows for a certain freedom from the capitalist logics that function to segregate different kinds of content in mainstream porn production. Apparently seen as somehow existing outside of the oppressive system through which audiences are commodified and compartmentalized, alt-porn viewers are configured as more enlightened, or in any case, less likely to respond well to hypersexualized or fetishized images of people of color.

Kimberly Kane, after directing for Vivid-ALT, was hired to direct for their interracial line, *Blackmaled*. Despite the line's absurd and somewhat fetishistic title, her films eschew the racist discourse of most interracial porn. Kane explains that this is precisely why she was drawn to directing these films:

I love interracial porn. I like watching it, and I'm into it, but I don't like the verbal weirdness of interracial porn. So I don't have that in my movies. Instead I take my own look that I brought to the alt things, and I bring it into the interracial stuff.

According to her, her titles "sold really well," thus reaffirming the assumptions about alt-porn fans' interest in diversity and resistance to racist rhetoric. To that extent, mainstream alt, a trend that seems to have more or less run its course, may nonetheless prove influential in helping to shift or expand the mainstream industry's institutionalized axioms with regard to racial representation, by demonstrating that nonracist depictions of interracial or "ethnic" sex can in fact be lucrative.

This is not to suggest that we should be overly sanguine about the potential of alternative pornographies, especially the mainstream incarnations. It seems that, despite Kane's intentions to resist racist rhetoric, the marketing of *Kimberly Kane's Been Blackmaled* (2011) nonetheless employs some of the typical fetishizing discourse: the DVD cover advertises the film as,

“featuring Miss Kane’s very first DP & interracial sex scene EVER!” While that phrase does not promote outright racist ideologies, it nonetheless marks off interracial sex as taboo and exceptional, and equates having sex with a black man to the somewhat extreme (at least, outside of pornography) sexual practice of double penetration (DP). Beyond issues of marketing and representation, people of color continue to be routinely excluded as cultural producers of alt-porn by mainstream corporations. Other than Kane, a white man (Paul Thomas) and an Asian/American man (Bryan Xin) have directed films for Vivid’s *Blackmaled* line; the erasure of black men’s subjectivity as filmmakers in a series designed to capitalize on their racialized masculinity effectively replicates the objectification of people of color common to other mainstream porn contexts.

Exemplifying another problematic tendency in the commercialization of alt, *Suicide Girls* generated outrage when the company’s owner chose to sell content to other, more overtly commercial, mainstream porn sites. Founded by Missy Suicide (née Selena Mooney) and Spooky Suicide (née Sean Suhl) in 2001, the site had come under fire by the fall of 2005, “when several of the models expressed dismay at how the site was being managed and how the girls were being treated.”⁹² The ill treatment is reported to have included verbal abuse perpetrated by Suhl, as well as generally exploitative policies and practices. A number of the models apparently had not realized that the contracts that they had signed allowed for the selling of their images to other sites, the politics and aesthetics of which might be antithetical to their own. Ray suggests that “the women who self-define as SuicideGirls regard themselves and the site as having alternative values and being supportive of (DIY) do-it-yourself efforts and a punk rock, anti-corporate ethos,”⁹³ and thus were especially dismayed to realize that their faith in the company’s good intentions had been misplaced. This sense of betrayal of subcultural values led Molly

Crabapple, a former SuicideGirl to describe the site in the *New York Press* as “the Wal-Mart of alt-porn.”⁹⁴

In alt-porn, a seeming binary between artistry and authenticity is reconciled through the notion of artist as authentic: art, as self-expression, is authentic in a way that corporatized, artless, mindlessly reproduced, conventional images supposedly are not. The connection between alt-porn and various subcultures and artist communities evokes the connections between artistic and sexual expression, community, and activism in the riot grrrl movement from the 1990s:

The case of riot grrrl is particularly interesting here because of the way it foregrounds ordinary women’s presentation of their bodies and sexual personae as a site of importance and complexity. Drawing on a DIY ethic of countercultural production apparent in a range of radical movements and subcultures, riot grrrl made bodily display a means of debating and reappropriating female sexuality.⁹⁵

Like alt-porn, riot grrrl is a youth-based movement that promoted sexual assertiveness, various forms of experimentation, and conscious embodiment as aspects of activism. This assertion of female sexuality often involved a recuperation of what might be described as girliness or hyperfemininity, but with a growl (hence, “grrrl”). Joy Press, in *The Village Voice*, discusses the condescending dismissal of so-called “do-me feminism,” and explains the significance of the word girl in the context of the idea of “girl power”:

Girl reserves the right to think about clothes and makeup but she still expects to be taken seriously. *Girl* isn’t afraid to be obnoxious or snarly for fear she’ll be seen as unfeminine. [...] *Girl* knows she’s as good as a guy, but she’s proud to be girly and to wield her girl power.⁹⁶

Girliness has, of course, gotten a bad rap over the years, but riot grrrl was an attempt to reclaim it as a subject position, within the broader contexts of music and art production (often, specifically, punk music and zine publishing), feminist activism, youth cultures, and community building.

As discussed in Chapter 2, in *Neo-feminist Cinema and the Rise of the Girly Film*, Hilary Radner uses the concept of the girly girl and the girly film to critique choice feminism, or what she calls neo-feminism. She argues that the choice to present oneself as girly – as with any other form of individual self-expression – tends to be deeply entrenched within the late capitalist system of commodity fetishism and its imperative to create and consolidate “individual” identities through conspicuous consumption. She also points out that the choice (for a cis-woman) to present oneself as girly is ultimately self-serving and easy, in a culture that expects biology to align with gender presentation. Context is, as ever, important, though, and I would argue, following Julia Serano, that femininity is so maligned in American culture that the conscious choice to reclaim and perform femininity can be a politically powerful act, especially when that choice is combined with forms of activism or knowledge production.⁹⁷

Of course these ideas are complicated by the addition of capitalist logics when we are talking not about any given woman’s individual self-presentation but rather the representation of femininity in commodified media forms. Writing about the “constrained optimism” with which authors like Feona Attwood and Katrien Jacobs approach the phenomenon of alt-porn, Stephen Maddison argues that,

So-called “sexualisation” may have offered a degree of what has been described as “democratization” in relation to access to sexual culture and visibility for minorities and women, but the terms of that “democratization” are at best problematic, and have been highly contested.⁹⁸

He concludes that, “The celebration of choice, even where that choice offers apparently ethical forms of commodity, works to re-confirm the logic of neoliberalism” by locating ethics within the context of purchasing decisions.⁹⁹ I would add that the commodification of politics, like feminism, by corporate entities, like DaneJones.com (in Sophie Delancy’s example above), constitutes one of the most striking instances of oppressive market logic, obscuring as it does feminist pornographers’ genuine attempts at political intervention through instituting ethical production practices and diversifying pornographic representation.

So it is true that we should attend to the workings of the industries and infrastructures that reproduce pornographic images, but unless we are to dismiss all of the output of all of the American culture industries on the basis of their relationships to capitalism, it is not fair to do so with pornography. Exceptionalist rhetoric that frames the porn industry as entirely separate from other media industries ignores significant overlaps and interrelationships among them – for instance, the fact that AOL Time Warner is now among the most successful distributors of pornography via VOD.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, it reproduces the oversimplified, repressive assumption that depictions of explicit sex are inherently misogynistic or otherwise problematic.

As I have argued throughout, it is important to resist discourses of exceptionalism about the porn industry, as they enable wholesale dismissals of an important cultural phenomenon.¹⁰¹ Katrien Jacobs argues that, “Despite the rapid commercialization of alternative sex culture as ‘indieporn’ or ‘altporn,’ the web hosts vibrant, imaginative, and cross-cultural porn spaces.”¹⁰² Maddison is ultimately skeptical of this idea, but I would take the sentiment a step further, as it has now become all but impossible to distinguish entirely between mainstream and indie/alt-porn, because sites that had started out as independent – like *No Fauxxx*, now subsumed under Courtney Trouble’s *Indie Porn Revolution* conglomerate – have become increasingly

corporatized, even as they retain their artistic integrity and political valence; because of the commonality of crossovers by performers and filmmakers from one context to the other; and because some of the most interesting, radical work, like Kimberly Kane's, is created within firmly mainstream contexts. For that reason, I am somewhat less cynical about the mainstream co-optation of what began ostensibly as a DIY, grassroots endeavor, and less interested in distinguishing between them.

In fact, much porn scholarship has tended to focus on alternative pornographies, and to avoid the mainstream as a bad object. According to Maddison, this focus on alt-porn "tends to maintain an investment in the promise of agency, where this agency is a function of the expansion of the technological resources available in a networked culture, the proliferation of choice, and the blurred boundary between consumer and producer."¹⁰³ Indeed, Feona Attwood evokes Henry Jenkins' conception of participatory culture in her discussion of alt-porn, citing it as an example of the "move towards an era of cultural convergence in which commercial and amateur media production increasingly sit side by side and in which people take hold of media technologies to construct communities in ways that have not been possible in the past."¹⁰⁴ Sites like *No Fauxxx* and *Burning Angel* were designed to allow for online interaction with performers/models, and actively sought out members of specific communities – queer and Goth/punk subcultures, respectively – to join the sites as models/performers, so there was in fact a distinct emphasis on participation. These sites also complicate the division between amateur and professional, as several of their creators began as amateurs – like *Burning Angel*'s Joanna Angel and *No Fauxxx*'s Courtney Trouble – but have since professionalized their work and personas, shifting from hobbyists to career pornographers and from webmistresses to DVD producers. And yet, academic treatments of alt-porn have tended to avoid engagement with its

more overtly mainstream incarnations, even when they acknowledge – as both Jacobs’ and Attwood’s work does – the elasticity of concepts of mainstream and alternative.

Both Jacobs and Attwood mention Eon McKai’s *Art School Sluts* in passing, but even though Attwood names an article after the film, both neglect to discuss it in any depth.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, although Tristan Taormino would go on to acknowledge that “there is not necessarily a clear, discrete division between ‘feminist/queer/indie porn’ and ‘mainstream porn’” in the inaugural issue of *Porn Studies*, the contributors to the *Feminist Porn Book*, for the most part, do not take on the mainstream industry as an object of study.¹⁰⁶ As Susana Paasonen puts it (by way of Mark Jancovich), “Much of the recent research on porn focuses on examples seen as transgressive, while simultaneously construing mainstream porn as that ‘where nothing interesting ever happens.’”¹⁰⁷ This reluctance to engage with the mainstream is not apparent, however, in bodies of work designed solely to critique the industry: in fact, anti-porn scholarship tends to focus exclusively on the mainstream, which tends to be more difficult than alt-porn to defend as anti- or nonsexist.¹⁰⁸ For that reason, among others mentioned above, it is important for academics with an investment in analyzing industry praxis and output without the wholesale dismissal thereof, to contend directly and meaningfully with its most institutionalized, commodified, corporate forms.

Toward that end, I have focused here primarily on professional pornographers, even as I acknowledge the slipperiness of the distinction between amateur and professional, and even though – as discussed above – alt-porn has significant associations with amateur, independent, and DIY ethos and production cultures. Another reason to focus on the mainstream is that it, as Dick Hebdidge and others have argued, tends to appropriate and subsume its alternatives and competitors if they prove themselves profitable.¹⁰⁹ The “constrained optimism” that Jacobs,

Attwood, and Paasonen have exhibited is not quite anachronistic at this time, but as the promise of Net Neutrality is increasingly whittled away, possibilities for the Internet as the great equalizer disappear along with it. As Joanna Angel explains of the early days of her site, *Burning Angel*,

At that time, you couldn't find free pictures of girls everywhere – particularly tattooed girls anywhere – so it was a rare thing. The fact that we were able to get between five and ten members a day, even though we were only charging ten dollars a month; that would never happen now. So sometimes people are inspired by my story and want to do it, and I'm like, "You can't do that. You have to think of a different beginning." There's no way you could put up ten pictures of naked girls and anyone's gonna pay for it now.¹¹⁰

The industry is indeed changing as the result of the increasing availability of free content on the web, and while this has, to some extent, increased the overall diversity of porn content and enabled many amateur producers to thrive, it has not necessarily enabled a massive proliferation of independent, community-based pornographies. And, as a perusal of the free content available on sites like YouPorn, PornoTube, Tube8, or PornHub will show, it has mostly made the most common porn conventions more visible and readily available.

Fortunately, alternative pornographies, even the mainstream incarnations, have tended to be female-friendly on the levels of production and representation. They tend to feature strong, assertive female characters, and sometimes also underrepresented genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and body types, and the productions are frequently woman-helmed. The associations between art and alt-porn have tended (though not necessarily) to mean that, if nothing else, alt-porn productions are created with care and intentionality. In the most cynical examples, that merely represents a desire to cash in on a profitable trend, but in the most thoughtful instances, it

means that ethical production practices combine with artistic concepts and strategies to convey activist ideals effectively. The mainstream crossover appeal of these productions – unlike much of queer porn, which can be alienating to straight male viewers (although there certainly are examples of crossover success for queer productions as well) – allows for a broader dissemination of these ideas.

In a series of recent tweets, Madison Young used the hashtag “#anal4art”¹¹¹ to advertise a series of “anus prints” that she has made and intends to sell on her upcoming book tour and workshop series. One of the workshops, appropriately titled “Intersections of Queer Performance Art and Feminist Pornography,” will take place at Grace Exhibition Space & Gallery in Brooklyn. There she will guide the audience,

through a multi-media presentation consisting of video art, film, photography, and documentation of live performance art works created by feminists, queers, counter-culture renegades and activists who are addressing sexuality, sex work, and sexual identity in an explicit and graphic manner through their media and conceptually driven works of art. Young will also be presenting on short excerpts of sex positive artistically driven pornography and engage in a conversation surrounding the importance of both sexually explicit art and pornography in our culture.¹¹²

Her work moves back and forth between art-making and porn production, but in some cases, as in this workshop, it moves among them – straddling and blurring the boundaries thereof. Young has long been open about using her earnings from performing in both queer and mainstream pornography to help fund her feminist art gallery, Femina Potens, and as such is perhaps the perfect person to address the intersections between art and porn.

In that sense, she has been doing “anal for art” for years now, but her recent use of the phrase involves the selling of her pornographic persona by way of her art. As with Annie Sprinkle’s “tit prints,”¹¹³ the largest market for Young’s “anus prints” is likely the fans of her pornography. Both women have of course also developed a significant fan base as artists and feminist activists, but the idea of using their “naughty bits” to make prints, especially when combined with the hashtag phrase, “anal4art” – as opposed to “anus art” or even “anal art” – is suggestive of the marketing of their pornographic “goods” for the benefit of their art praxis. Or, perhaps more accurately, it signifies that these two ways of being and modes of production have, for these women, collapsed in on one another.

Although for some alt-pornographers aesthetics may stand in for ethics, in the cases of Young and Sprinkle, among others, the medium is (at least part of) the message. By incorporating art into their porn and porn into their art, both women promote the importance of access to personal self-expression, both sexual and artistic. Young, in *Thin Line Between Art and Sex*, advocates for the idea of sex itself as art form. Although pornography is doubtless not what Adrienne Rich had in mind when she called for the democratization of art-making, it nonetheless provides more and easier access for women’s cultural production than either the fine arts establishment or the Hollywood film industry. In an interview with avant-garde musician/artist/muse Lydia Lunch for an issue of *Artlink* focused on “Art, Pornography & Culture,” Caroline Farmer writes that, “Women need to fight for an alternative pornography. Women need a pornography that addresses all the alternatives of our sexuality, in every format, so that there’s something for everyone.”¹¹⁴ Like queer porn, alt-porn has more or less initiated a move toward this utopian vision of the diversification of porn production, by bringing together alternative styles, subjectivities, bodies, aesthetics, and – in some cases – politics with explicit

sexual representation. In the pages above, I have merely scratched the surface of its possibilities; there are many other filmmakers and texts to cover – more and more all the time. And I, for one, am glad of that.

¹ Promotional flier, Echo Park Film Center, print.

² Feona Attwood, “Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn,” in *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*, ed. Claire Hines and Darren Kerr (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 44.

³ See, for instance: Susanna Paasonen, “Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism,” in *New Media & Society* 12:8 (2010); Feona Attwood, “Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn,” in Claire Hines and Derren Kerr, eds., *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁴ Susanna Paasonen, “Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism,” 1298.

⁵ Ibid., 1298.

⁶ Audacia Ray, *Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads, and Cashing in on Internet Sexploration* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 136.

⁷ “Internet History,” *The Computer History Museum*, accessed April 20, 2014, http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/internet_history_90s.html.

⁸ Susanna Paasonen, "Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism," 1299.

⁹ For a history of alt-porn online, see: "Genre History Timeline," *Alt Porn*, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://altporn.net/news/2007/05/15/altporn-altporn-genre-history-timeline>.

¹⁰ Joanna Angel, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, October 3, 2010.

¹¹ Susanna Paasonen, "Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism," 1299.

¹² Audacia Ray, *Naked on the Internet*, 151.

¹³ Joanna Angel, interview.

¹⁴ Joanna Angel, interview.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Audacia Ray, *Naked on the Internet*, 160.

¹⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1993), 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁸ Susanna Paasonen, "Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism," 1300.

¹⁹ Feona Attwood, "Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn," 52.

²⁰ Dr. Jay, "Naked and Famous," *X Critic*, September 20, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.xcritic.com/review/37110/naked-and-famous/>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Feona Attwood, "Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn," 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 343, 8.

²⁵ *U.S. v. Stagliano*, 693 F.Supp.2d 25 (D.D.C., 2010), U.S. District Court, District of Columbia, February 19, 2010.

²⁶ Cited in Amanda Hess, “Opening Arguments in the U.S. vs. John ‘Buttman’ Stagliano,” *The Sexist* (Blog), *Washington City Paper*, July 13, 2010, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/sexist/2010/07/13/opening-arguments-in-the-u-s-vs-john-buttman-stagliano/>.

²⁷ Margie Schnibbe, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, November 13, 2010.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. In fact, in the final cut of the film, the dom inserts the dildo manually prior to cutting the streamers, but the streamers are cut before she penetrates the sub using a strap-on.

³¹ Julie Simone, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, May 12, 2013.

³² Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1996), 1.

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Margie Schnibbe, interview.

³⁵ Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 260.

³⁶ Quoted in Tristan Taormino, “The Prince of Alt-Porn,” *The Village Voice*, November 8, 2005, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-11-08/columns/the-prince-of-alt-porn/>.

³⁷ Feona Attwood, “Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn,” 47.

³⁸ Stoya, “Natural Beauty Is Just a Marketing Tool,” *Vice*, June 20, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.vice.com/read/natural-beauty-is-nothing-more-than-a-marketing-tool>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Feona Attwood, “No Money Shot? Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures,” *Sexualities* 10:4 (2007), 449.

⁴² No pun intended!

⁴³ Bonus Features, *Audition* (2007), dir. Julie Simone, prod. Julie Simone Productions, feat. Gia Paloma, Julie Simone, Liam Lockran.

⁴⁴ Julie Simone, interview.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Emily Witt, “What Do You Desire?” *n+1* 16 (Spring 2013), 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸ *Marina Abramovic Institute*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/mai/mai/4/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009 [1974]).

⁵¹ Adrienne Rich, “Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts,” in *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013 [2001]), 103.

⁵² Emily Witt, “What Do You Desire?,” 32.

⁵³ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶ *Kink*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.kink.com/k/?c=1/>.

⁵⁷ Kate Conger, "Gag Order: Sex Workers Allege Mistreatment at Kink.com," *SF Weekly*, February 20, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.sfweekly.com/2013-02-20/news/sex-workers-allege-endangerment-mistreatment-at-local-porn-company-kink/full/>.

⁵⁸ Grant Kien, "BDSM and Transgression 2.0: The Case of Kink.com," in *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*, ed. David J. Gunkel and Ted Gournelos (New York: Continuum Books, 2011), 120.

⁵⁹ Kate Conger, "Gag Order: Sex Workers Allege Mistreatment at Kink.com."

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Grant Kien, "BDSM and Transgression 2.0: The Case of Kink.com," 121.

⁶² Darren Roberts, *The Unsexpected Story: The Real Story about the Billion Dollar Adult Entertainment Business* (Woodland Hills, CA: Clearly Confused Inc., 2012), 189.

⁶³ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁴ Madison Young, "The Politics of Kinky Porn and Feminism" (workshop), *The Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, April 6, 2013.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Tristan Taormino, "The Prince of Alt-Porn."

⁶⁷ Violet Blue, "Art School Sluts" (Review), *Adult DVD Talk*, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.adultdvdtalk.com/review/art-school-sluts>.

⁶⁸ This idea is reaffirmed when her rejection stands. The student is not, at any point in the film, won over by the teacher; she never has sex with him or anyone else, so her refusal of his advances is not mere pretense.

⁶⁹ Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 43.

⁷⁰ With Los Angeles' Measure B, the "County of Los Angeles Safer Sex in the Adult Film Industry Act," which requires the use of condoms in all scenes involving vaginal or anal penetration, the industry received a major blow in this regard in 2012, but historically mainstream porn producers have resisted condom usage (and indeed, many have threatened to move their productions to other locations, like Las Vegas, in order to get around the Measure).

⁷¹ "Art House Sluts – DVD – Madison Young," *Adult DVD Marketplace*, accessed April 2, 2014, http://www.adultdvdmarketplace.com/dvd_view_192642.html/.

⁷² Blakovich identifies as a boi in her profile on *Crash Pad Series*, but uses female pronouns ("Sid Blakovich," accessed April 12, 2014, <http://crashpadseries.com/queer-porn/character/syd-blakovich>). Lee identifies as genderqueer and prefers the pronouns "they" and "them."

⁷³ Feona Attwood, "No Money Shot? Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures," 450.

⁷⁴ Joseph Klarl, "Barbara Rubin: *Christmas on Earth*," *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics, and Culture*, February 5, 2013, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/barbara-rubin-christmas-on-earth>.

⁷⁵ Courtney Trouble, "Porn's New Key Words" (Closing Keynote), *The Second Annual Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, April 6, 2014.

⁷⁶ For more on this, see Kathleen McHugh, “The Experimental ‘Dunyementary’: A Cinematic Signature Effect,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, Ed. Robin Blaetz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁷⁷ That is, other than illegal actions, like bestiality or pedophilia.

⁷⁸ Madison Young, “The Politics of Kinky Porn and Feminism.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Kimberly Kane, interview by author, phone recording, January 13, 2013.

⁸¹ Sophie Delancey, interview by author, phone recording, April 10, 2013.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Anne G. Sabo, PhD., *After Pornified: How Women Are Transforming Pornography & Why It Really Matters* (Washington: Zero Books, 2012), 110.

⁸⁵ Sophie Delancey, interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Delancey outlined the exploitative nature of .xxx, for which some of the mainstream porn elite were able to “get in on the ground floor and have the money to buy .xxx for their domains.” But beyond that, some companies exploited other companies’ copyrights, stealing the name of a website (for example, one might capitalize on the success of Kink.com by preemptively buying up the Kink.xxx domain) and exploiting it. Delancey names Jones as one such member of the mainstream porn elite.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “All Burning Angel DVDs,” *Burning Angel Store*, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://store.burningangel.com/products/all-burning-angel-dvds36/>.

⁹⁰ Joanna Angel, interview.

⁹¹ Linda Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 273.

⁹² Audacia Ray, *Naked on the Internet*, 161.

⁹³ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁴ José Ralat Maldonado, "Pin-Up or Shut Up," *New York Press*, October 8, 2005, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://nypress.com/pin-up-or-shut-up/>.

⁹⁵ Feona Attwood, "Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn," 49.

⁹⁶ Joy Press, "Notes on Girl Power: The Selling of Softcore Feminism," *The Village Voice*, September 23, 1997, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-10-18/specials/notes-on-girl-power/>.

⁹⁷ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2009), 325, 326.

⁹⁸ Stephen Maddison, "Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur?: Sex, Porn and Cultural Politics," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 80-81 (2013), 103.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰⁰ "Porn Profits: Corporate America's Secret," *ABC News*, January 28, 2012, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132001>.

¹⁰¹ Maddison does not argue that porn should be abandoned as an object of study, but neither does he leave much room for viewing it in any sort of positive light.

¹⁰² Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics*, 12.

¹⁰³ Stephen Maddison, "Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur?," 104.

¹⁰⁴ Feona Attwood, "No Money Shot?," 442.

¹⁰⁵ Feona Attwood, “Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn.”

¹⁰⁶ Georgina Voss, “Tristan Taormino Interviewed by Georgina Voss,” *Porn Studies* 1:1-2 (Spring 2014), 204.

¹⁰⁷ Susanna Paasonen, “Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism,” 1300.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, the work of Gail Dines and Ariel Levy.

¹⁰⁹ Hebdidge speaks about cultural mainstreams under capitalism more broadly, but the same can be said of the mainstream porn industry specifically.

¹¹⁰ Joanna Angel, interview.

¹¹¹ Hashtags used by @madisonyoung, in tweets from March 29 & 30, 2014.

¹¹² “Intersections of Queer Performance Art and Feminist Pornography,” *Grace Exhibition Space*, accessed April 10, 2014, http://www.grace-exhibition-space.com/performance.php?event_id=441/.

¹¹³ Sprinkle sells art prints made with her breasts via her website, *Annie Sprinkle.org(asm)*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.anniesprinkle.org/>.

¹¹⁴ Caroline Farmer, “An Accelerated Life: Lydia Lunch,” *Artlink* 18 no. 3 (1998), 24.

CONCLUSION

“A Different Beginning,” or the Politics of Prurience

Sometimes people are inspired by my story and want to do it, and I'm like, "You can't do that. You have to think of a different beginning."-Joanna Angel

With this project, my greatest difficulty, ultimately, has been organizational: I've had a hard time deciding where to situate certain filmmakers' work. Maria Beatty, a lesbian fetish filmmaker whose work is distributed as pornography but who has collaborated with experimental filmmakers like MM Serra and artist/pornographer Margie Schnibbe, could be discussed in the chapters on Sexperimental Film, Feminist and Queer Porn, or Alt- and Art/Porn. Tristan Taormino is both a mainstream porn filmmaker and arguably the most vocal and well-known feminist porn practitioner. So where to place them? What began as a structural problem, however, has emerged as one of the best arguments in favor of my insistence on problematizing and blurring the boundaries between art, porn, and educational frameworks. Ultimately, though I had to generate some sort of organizing principle for my project, I am less interested in distinctions between production cultures or among various subgenres of adult video than I am in the overlaps and intersections among them. I have chosen, therefore, to queer the notion of the pornographic; that is, to broaden and expand its usage, and to prioritize a fluid “both/and” framework over the “either/or,” discussing a given filmmaker's work in whatever contexts seem relevant and placing experimental films in conversation with pornography.

By analyzing experimental film alongside pornography, and by highlighting “sexperimental film” as a bridge between two supposedly disparate modes of production, I have sought to break down the traditional binary that deems art and porn as mutually exclusive. This

binary functions to shore up elitist, classist frameworks, elevating high-class art at the expense of low-class pornography. A black and white photograph posted on *Deviant Art* by SuicideGirl Pandie Suicide, employs the binary to privilege the “artistic nude” found on sites like *Suicide Girls*, over implicitly inartistic pornography:¹

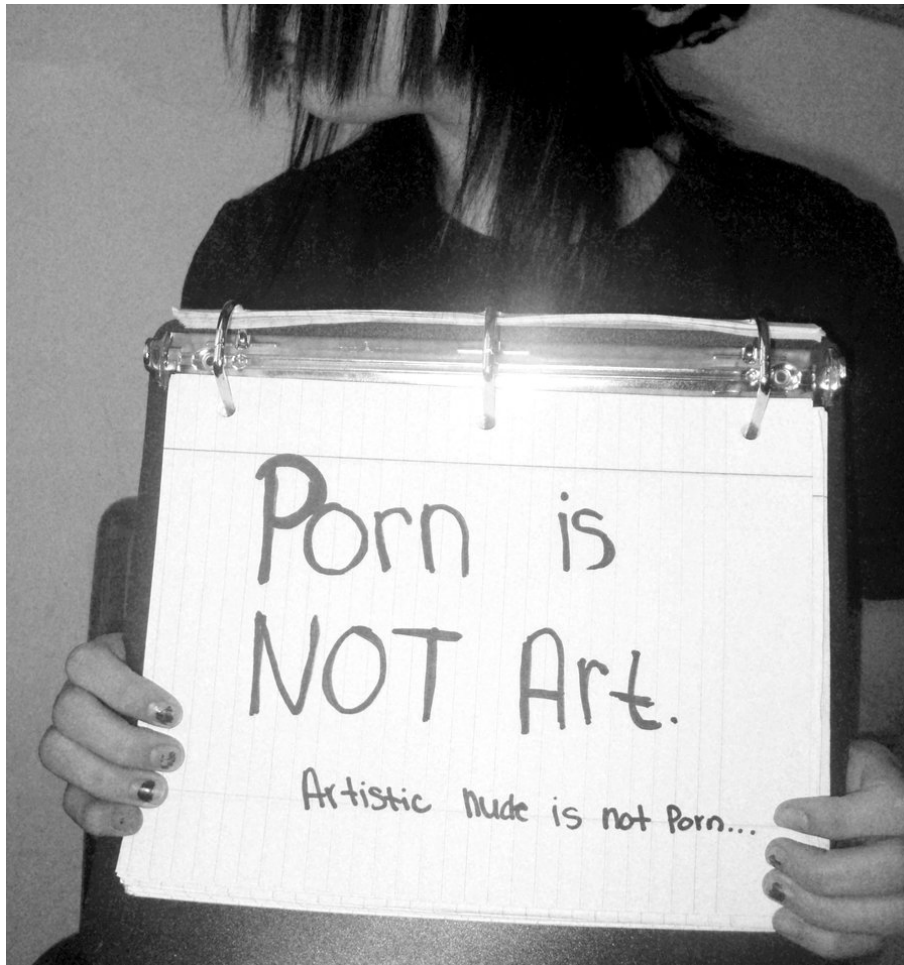


Fig. 5.1: SuicideGirl Pandie Suicide

She holds a sign, seemingly hand-written on lined paper in a three-ring binder – evoking pedagogical contexts – and declaring, “Porn is NOT art.” In the smaller lettering below, she adds that, “Artistic nude is not porn...” Porn is configured here as a monolithic category, defined precisely by its lack of artistic merit. This dichotomy is pervasive; but, as I am defining

it, without this negative valence, the term “pornographic” applies to any work that features graphic, hardcore sexual depictions, including those with investments in art or aesthetics.

Closely tied to the art/porn binary, the dichotomy that separates porn from erotica similarly preserves classist divisions, but in this there is a gendered dimension as well. The convention of aligning erotica and the erotic with women’s desires and aesthetics, and pornography and the pornographic with men’s has functioned largely to exclude women filmmakers from histories and other academic discussions of porn production. Associations of pornography with artless imagery, low production values, the degradation of women, and the privileging of male viewpoints and sexualities have furthermore encouraged some women filmmakers to eschew or disavow the label. The choice to employ it throughout this dissertation – whether in reference to a film that is overtly sold as porn, like *AfroDite Superstar*, or to a film that is exhibited at festivals or in museums or arthouse theaters, like *Fuses* – is the result of a conscious attempt to challenge these problematic gendered and classed assumptions.

Although it has long been the accepted wisdom that pornography should be defined by its intent – to arouse, and/or to make money – I would argue that this does not quite match up with industry definitions. Certainly pornography is a commercial enterprise, especially within the mainstream industry, but an individual filmmaker’s primary goal may not be to make money or to arouse the spectator, and the arousal that a film inspires can in any case also be critical. Annie Sprinkle describes films like the *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* – implicitly categorized as pornography in the *Internet Adult Film Database* – as not intended to be erotic. Tobi Hill-Meyer similarly explains that depicting hot sex is somewhere around “number 8” on her list of priorities as a filmmaker.² But although she describes her *Doing It Together* series as “erotic

documentary,” this move is largely strategic: she used the crowdfunding site, Kickstarter, to fund her project, and in order to do so, she needed to dissociate her work from pornography.

In a recent *SF Weekly* article, porn performer Siouxsie Q revealed that sex workers and projects featuring adult content are routinely the subjects of discrimination, if not by the crowdfunding sites themselves, then by their credit card processors.³ The stigma associated with pornography, in this way, proves oppressive; its negative associations can have real-world, economic and legal consequences. Hill-Meyer had sought to sidestep those challenges by contacting Kickstarter in advance (and joked that, in so doing, she basically “gave them a term paper”), to position her project as “erotic documentary” – a category of projects that had been funded successfully on their site in the past.⁴ Kickstarter uses Amazon for their payments, and Amazon in turn requires only that they do not fund pornography. Hill-Meyer surmises that Amazon trusts Kickstarter to make those determinations for themselves, and so she was successful in her petition: *Doing It Together, Vol. 2* was fully crowdfunded. Ultimately, though, Hill-Meyer is not opposed to using “porn” as a descriptor for her films, and indeed they are distributed as such via Trouble Films. She believes that pornography is a more expansive category than many will allow: “Why does porn have to be this [...] formulaic thing? [...] What if porn was there to make you think?”⁵ Here she points to the potential for critical arousal in overtly pornographic contexts.

The fluidity of pornography as a category allows us to move beyond conventional frameworks for analysis, and the success of Hill-Meyer’s grassroots fundraising campaign – as well as the mainstream industry’s growing interest in co-opting queer and feminist filmmakers and queer porn conventions – indicates a significant demand for sexually explicit films featuring underrepresented and non-normative body types, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and other

identity categories. Pornography can be art. Pornography can make us think. Pornography can be erotic, or it can resist eroticism, or even do both at once. When, through discourses of exceptionalism, we designate the pornographic as a separate category, into which we discard whatever offends our politics or sensibilities, we inevitably support repressive tendencies. As with the censorship of fisting by mainstream porn distributors, too often the category of the obscene has been used to police already over-regulated bodies and sexualities. Better, then, to defuse the term of its negative charge and allow “the pornographic” to describe all forms of hardcore filmmaking, be they highbrow or lowbrow, artistic or purely utilitarian, created by filmmakers of any gender for viewers of any gender.

Politics, like art, are often assumed to conflict with pornographic filmmaking, but the marked increase in feminist pornographers in recent years exists as a testament to the possibility of combining politics with prurience. As Courtney Trouble insisted, in their keynote speech at the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference, “Let feminism inform your porn. Let porn inform your feminism.”⁶ By injecting politics into pornography via a commitment to diversity and ethical production practices (among other things), and often through the use of critical arousal and/or the auto-pornographic, feminist pornographers insist not only on shifting the debate about pornography, but on shifting the debate *through* their pornography: the medium as the message. Beyond that, Trouble points to the need for feminists to support freedom of sexual expression, at least when combined with ethical labor practices, by letting porn inform feminism rather than contributing to the oppressive stigmatization of pornography and sex work.

Women’s access as producers and consumers of pornography seems to be changing even as I write. My research has uncovered a central paradox of women’s pornographic production: the very thing that has made women performers the subject of victim discourses propounded by

anti-porn feminists – their objectification in front of the camera – has ironically enabled them to seek empowerment through creative control from behind the camera. Indeed, the better a star is at objectifying herself, the easier her access to the means of production. A variety of complicating factors, including the individual's race, body type, age, body modifications (or lack thereof), and sexuality, can affect a performer's likelihood to achieve star power and thus also the ease of passage from in front of to behind the camera; but the overall number of women filmmakers working in and around the porn industry shows every sign of continuing to grow. It seems as though, nearly every day, I learn about another porn star who has made the transition to directing her own work; recent examples include Sovereign Skye and Bonnie Rotten.

In addition, the Internet – perpetually expanding and shifting in terms of its usages and the regulation thereof – makes it increasingly feasible for women to produce, direct, and distribute their own pornography, and for consumers to find something that speaks to them, but with the seemingly limitless quantities of online pornography available today, the question remains as to how visible any individual video can be in such a vast pornscape. Industry commentator Lux Alptrum, of Fleshbot.com, suggests that the rise of Internet porn accounts for an overall increase in diversification of pornography and its markets:

I think it's like the music industry. When you're just starting out, you kind of know the big five names, and once, if you are actively involved, you might seek out other stuff. If you are one of the big studios, you are in a position of power, just because you're more likely to get press attention, you have more connections, it's more likely that people will hear of you. But, at the end of the day, especially since the Internet makes it so much easier for even a novice to find whatever, they don't have quite the same privilege that they used to have.⁷

Here Alptraum points to the ways in which the availability of online content has helped to transfer some of the power from the major studios to the smaller production companies and to consumers. The major studios still, as she points out, maintain a fair amount of power, however, especially since some of them are key producers of couples porn, a market that has been strengthened rather than weakened as a result of the increasing accessibility of free adult content online. As several producers explained it to me, the people who seek out pirated videos or free amateur content from the tube sites (mostly straight males) tend to differ markedly from those (i.e. women and couples) who would be interested in buying a DVD of a story-driven adult film with high production values. So although several of the women I've spoken to in the last few years have decried the rise of free online content and Internet piracy, those who make couples porn have tended not to see that type of content as competition.

In the porn industry, as is also largely the case in Hollywood, professional filmmakers tend to make films that they intend to distribute via DVD. While their films may be available to stream, in whole or in part, online as well, this is one of the primary factors one can use to distinguish between professional and amateur producers. As producer Dan O'Connell puts it, "real studios put out DVDs."⁸ In a study of industry, it makes sense to focus on the professionals. The Internet continues, however, to be ripe for analysis in the field of pornography studies. There are several collected volumes dealing with online pornographies (including *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, ed. Feona Attwood, to which I contributed an article on online LGBTQ porn), but the field is vast and the topic remains understudied. Future avenues of study might include research into creators of amateur online videos, whose work I have entirely elided here.

Additionally, there are a number of individual women and collectives thereof directing pornography abroad, including Swedish filmmaker Erika Lust (currently based in Spain), UK filmmaker Anna Span, Australian filmmaker/webmistress Ms. Naughty, German filmmaker Petra Joy, the Danish Collective Puzzy Power, and the contributors to the Swedish anthology *Dirty Diaries* (Mia Engberg, 2009). As a way to limit what could be an overwhelming topic, however, I have focused here primarily on American production cultures. Anne G. Sabo, PhD., in *After Pornified: How Women Are Transforming Pornography & Why It Really Matters*, as well as several of the contributors to the *Feminist Porn Book*, have begun to address some of the contributions of women filmmakers making pornography in other national contexts, but the topic requires additional analysis.

I define “women” as a category broadly, and I have taken care to acknowledge the importance of intersectionality, as women’s identities are always complex and multiple. I have also striven to feature as broad a range of work and perspectives as possible, but some of the filmmakers whom I’ve interviewed have pointed to the common divide between the politics of diversity and the realities of access to actual individuals. Tobi Hill-Meyer told me that one of her primary goals in her porn production is “broad representational diversity.”⁹ Her films focus on conveying the sexual experiences of trans women. She came up with a list of different identity categories that she hoped to feature in her work, but then she realized that there were “only eight slots available,” and she could only squeeze so much diversity into one film. She specifically hoped to feature couplings of trans women with cis-gendered men (as well as with cis-gendered women and other trans women) in her *Doing It Together* series, and she found three couples who expressed interest in being featured. The logistics prevented them from filming

right away, however, and by the time those issues had been worked out, two of the couples had broken up and the third had decided they were no longer comfortable with appearing in the film.

This idea is echoed by Rebekah Nazarian, the General Manager of Filly Films, who also directs under the name Foochie LaBootz. She said she had hoped to include a “variety of bodies and hair color and girls,” in a film that she co-directed, *Four Rooms: Los Angeles*.¹⁰ She feels that she more or less accomplished this goal, but she hopes to increase the diversity in her subsequent titles. To paraphrase one filmmaker’s off-the-cuff remark, regardless of one’s commitment to diversity, in the end, it comes down to who shows up. The disconnect between filmmakers’ political goals and the actual options available to them is paralleled, to some extent, in my original research for this project. I have attempted to convey as broad a range of perspectives as possible, but to a certain extent, it comes down to who writes back. The people who wrote back to me have emerged as a singularly fascinating, intelligent, and generous group, but as I move forward with this project, I hope to speak to even more subjects; ideally I will manage to track down more trans women, genderqueer and gender questioning individuals, women of color, and disabled filmmakers, so that my study can more accurately reflect the diversity of women pornographers and sexperimental filmmakers. At the same time, my current project does, to a significant extent, accurately reflect the makeup of these production cultures. Access is still more available to able-bodied, cis-gendered, white women than to filmmakers who embody multiple layers of Otherness, and this is in itself a problem deserving of further attention.

In a recent article for *The Atlantic*, about the inaugural issue of the online journal *Porn Studies* (ed. Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith), Alexis C. Madrigal writes,

HuffPo noted last year that porn sites get more visitors than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined. And yet the majority of Americans say looking at porn is “wrong.” Porn is a national contradiction baked into the daily ablutions of hundreds of millions of people. This is a profoundly uncomfortable situation for a nation. So pornography remains undertheorized. [...] The problem, however, is that there are costs to even talking about pornography. This is true even in our supposed bastions of intellectual freedom, as several articles make clear. [...] Very few people want to be “the porn guy.” And so researchers and critics choose to do work on less fraught, less important topics.¹¹

So, although the stigma extends even to those of us who merely study the subject, in completing this project, I have chosen to count myself among those researchers who engage directly with the fraught yet important topic of porn studies. Joanna Angel, speaking to the changes that Internet porn has both wrought and undergone in the last decade, told me that, “sometimes people are inspired by my story and want to do it, and I’m like, ‘You can’t do that. You have to think of a different beginning.’”¹² I would argue that the same is true for porn studies. The field has changed dramatically in the last decade, and although porn scholars routinely face censorship and dismissal, our numbers continue to grow. We cannot, however, advance the field meaningfully if we continue to engage with our object of study only in the same old ways. Industry studies, by inviting pornographers to participate in the conversation that has been taking place about them but without them for far too long, has revolutionized the study of pornography. It is imperative that we continue to approach the topic from a variety of different methodologies, perspectives, and disciplines, and the inaugural issue of *Porn Studies* constitutes a positive step in that direction.

I have argued, in the previous pages, for the feminist viability of mainstream pornography production by women, while acknowledging that the politics represented in the texts themselves can be fraught or ambivalent. I have also argued for the consideration of intersections and overlaps between mainstream and queer/feminist/alt porn production. Even as I write this, the queer porn production and distribution company Trouble Films has been offered a mainstream distribution deal through PurePlay Media, further blurring the lines between these supposedly disparate production cultures.¹³ Although this may simply be attributed to PurePlay's cynical desire to cash in on an increasingly lucrative subgenre and production model, it nonetheless will result in greater visibility for a resolutely feminist, queer filmmaker. Hill-Meyer, whose films are currently distributed by Trouble Films and will be included in the deal with PurePlay, insisted in her contract that the marketing of her films avoid cissexist or transphobic language – like “tranny” or “shemale” – and the company has agreed to those terms.¹⁴ So it seems that the independently produced, overtly political and often radically feminist, queer porn films currently distributed by Trouble Films will retain their political valence as they transition into the mainstream.

Various forms of authenticity, a concept that is consistently championed in both the marketing of feminist porn and in academic discourses about the subgenre, are valued in many types of mainstream, non-feminist pornography as well. As Siouxsie Q suggests, quoting fellow performer Arabelle Raphael, in another recent article for *SF Weekly*:

“The emphasis on authenticity in feminist porn can be problematic,” wrote porn performer and activist Arabelle Raphael recently. “It erases the fact that performing is labor and not just ‘fun.’ The people feminist porn companies hire are sex workers; we make our living creating hot scenes... It's our craft and I am proud of it.” Along with

Raphael, I fear that the concept of “authenticity” has entered the feminist porn movement into a dangerous game of respectability politics. I would like to see more emphasis placed on fair labor practices than on whether or not I have a “real” orgasm.¹⁵

Indeed, this is the primary, and probably the best, way to differentiate between feminist porn and the rest of porn: by interrogating the labor and production practices of a given film or filmmaker. As I have suggested, however, a number of filmmakers working for overtly mainstream companies like Wicked or Vivid, including Jessica Drake, Dan O’Connell, Foochie LaBootz, and Tristan Taormino, do employ these practices. As such, the distinctions between “mainstream” and alternative or feminist pornographies are more slippery and complex than many commentators would allow. And as Raphael suggests, when it becomes prescriptive, privileging certain kinds of identities and desires over others, the endorsement of authenticity can become oppressive. The politics of respectability – dictating proper feminism or “real” queerness – can replicate the kinds of elitist subtexts that accompany the distinction between art and porn or the erotic and the pornographic.

At the same time, we must take care to acknowledge the ongoing blind spots and discrimination in the mainstream sector, against which independent producers and directors continue to struggle. Hill-Meyer told me that she has a number of friends who supplement their queer, independent porn work through performing or directing in the mainstream. Courtney Trouble and Madison Young both do this quite openly. But Hill-Meyer herself has found that avenue of access blocked to her: “the particulars of my gendered experience make that impossible for me.”¹⁶ An anecdote she shared, about a queer porn producer friend of hers who funds the travel expenses for her own shoots by shooting for other companies, proves instructive in that regard. For instance, if her friend wants to shoot a scene for her own work in LA, she

finds a mainstream company that will pay to shoot her in LA, and uses those earnings to cover the costs associated with the trip and her own shoot. This friend repeatedly encouraged Hill-Meyer to try the same strategy. So Hill-Meyer eventually asked the friend to share her contacts in New York and LA so that she too could ask them if they'd be interested in shooting her: "And of course, I ask them, and they're like, 'No, you're trans.' And so [...] that does impact what I can do as a producer and a director, because I don't have the same options that cis producers and directors do."¹⁷

The ongoing systemic discrimination in the porn industry is not, however, justification for the wholesale dismissal of the medium as sexist, transphobic, ableist, homophobic, and racist. Hill-Meyer herself admits that, "The feminist critiques of porn that come up in the anti-porn movement are largely things that I agree with 100 percent. I disagree with the conclusions."¹⁸ The conclusions that she refers to here are that all pornography is bad, should be censored, and is not a worthy object of study. Like Lux Alptraum, she offers the music industry as an analogy, arguing that,

People will critique pornography, but what they're doing is – it's like, if you're a music critic and you only listen to the Billboard Top 40, and use that as a basis to say music is bad. And you're missing a whole, huge swath of what that medium is. And so, I'm about expanding and using the medium in different ways.¹⁹

These analogies to the music industry, by conceptualizing pornography as just one among many art forms or production cultures, resist the discourses of exceptionalism that enable its stigmatization. Hill-Meyer overtly calls for the reading of pornography as simply a medium like any other, and specifically points to the variety of alternative pornographies that seek to redress some of the blind spots and more problematic tendencies of mainstream porn. I would add that,

just as it is considered acceptable for music theorists and critics to study and analyze popular music, so too should mainstream pornography be acknowledged as a worthy object of study, above and beyond regulatory, pro- or anti- frameworks.

The vast majority of discussions of pornography as an industry and a genre – with some notable recent exceptions, including the *Feminist Porn Book* and various articles about alt- or netporn – have focused somewhat myopically on women's onscreen, on-scene representation. Because women's bodies are so often the object of debate, which – in the absence of their own voices – merely repeats or compounds their supposed objectification in porn film texts, I view it as politically powerful to focus on women as subjects, creating their own sexually explicit cinema. It has taken several decades for women to emerge as a force to be reckoned with behind the camera in the mainstream adult industry, but their contributions, as I have suggested here, have been far from insignificant.²⁰ In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams refers to the utopian tendencies of the pornographic imagination, but as many before me have pointed out, the actual material conditions of porn production have been anything but. Even so, women's opportunities to direct in pornography, especially when compared with their notable lack thereof in Hollywood production cultures, have enabled the expansion and diversification of cinematic sexual representation. And, although sexually explicit media are most often discussed as the purview of men, the fact that women were so instrumental in the development of sexperimental film, which prefigured hardcore industrial cinema by several years, suggests that women do indeed have a stake in the creation and consumption of pornographic moving images. As such, it is vital that we continue to consider the many ongoing overlaps, as well as the distinctions, between the types of pornographic imagery created by women working in, outside of, and on the fringes of the porn industry.

As Dorothy Allison famously wrote of the limitations of anti-porn feminism, “Real lesbians are not a theoretical construct.”²¹ I would broaden that to include all women, and indeed all sexual beings, and that is why my primary methodologies, industrial and textual analysis, engage directly with filmmakers’ work and contextualize it with their perspectives, labor practices, and experiences. Although I do not always take their words at face value, instead placing them in conversation with their texts, I do take seriously their valuable insights on the gender politics of pornographic production. Pornography does not, of course, depict the unmediated reality of sex (any more than filmmakers’ testimony conveys the unmediated reality of their experiences), but neither is it necessarily any further from that reality than other mainstream media forms. And in the various subgenres – alt-, queer, feminist, lesbian, and so on – of porn dedicated to reflecting a more accurate sense of the diversity of sexual tastes, desires, and expressions, it arguably comes closer. Writing about Annie Sprinkle’s *Anatomy of a Pin-up Photo*, Maria Elena Buszeck argues,

when women are given the opportunity to take control of, deconstruct, and find pleasure in the representation and performance of their sexual representation, they may ultimately expose the very mythology with which women’s sexuality and beauty are associated.²²

And that, finally, is perhaps the best reason to focus on women’s cultural production of hardcore film and video. The judgment of and desire to eradicate women’s sexual expression is itself oppressive, and the only way to contend with potentially problematic images is to do just that – contend with them, analyze them, treat them as worthy of study, and as the influential media objects that they are, rather than dismiss them outright. Along the way, we may find ourselves surprised to discover the pleasures of “a sexual economy of illicit eroticism”²³ and the political potential of these supposedly “bad objects.”

In the beginning, I sought to categorize women's porn production, and I expected to find that most women directors merely replicate the formulas and conventions of mainstream pornography made by and for men. The recent proliferation of feminist and queer porn, and of women filmmakers more broadly, however, has complicated any attempts to pin down "women filmmakers" as a coherent category. The increase in porn production by and for women has enabled an associated increase in diversity, in terms of both the identities of the filmmakers and the bodies and sexualities represented in their film texts. So, by the time I was ready to set the proverbial pen to paper, I had realized that I needed a different beginning: I had to reassess my initial assumptions, and entirely revise my Introduction. Women filmmakers – many of whom do identify as feminist, whether or not they make overtly feminist porn – do in fact seem to be more committed to diversity and more equitable gender representations than their male counterparts, and in that sense signify the feminist possibilities of the pornographic more broadly. There are, however, male filmmakers, like Paul Thomas, Tony Comstock, and Carlos Batts, who seem equally concerned with these issues, and there are nonetheless women filmmakers, like Lizzy Borden, who are entirely disinterested in them. As I conclude this project, I find that the only definitive statement that I can make about women pornographers and sexperimental filmmakers is that their goals, work, and experiences are diverse, and that their contributions to a much-maligned but ever-popular medium cannot – and should not – be dismissed.

¹ "Pandie Suicide," *Deviant Art*, accessed May 19, 2014,
<http://pandiesuicide.deviantart.com/art/PORN-IS-NOT-ART-279384887/>.

² Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview by author, phone recording, April 17, 2014.

³ Siouxsie Q, “Kicked Out: Crowdfunding Shows Its Bias,” *SF Weekly*, April 2, 2014, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.sfweekly.com/2014-04-02/culture/whore-next-door-crowdsourcing-paypal/>.

⁴ Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Courtney Trouble, “Porn’s New Key Words” (Closing Keynote), *The 2nd Annual Feminist Porn Conference*, The University of Toronto, April 6, 2014. A video of the keynote, recorded and edited by Tobi Hill-Meyer and posted by QueerPorn.TV, is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLBcQxxwOnw/> (posted on April 9, 2014).

⁷ Lux Alptraum, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, July 9, 2010.

⁸ Dan O’Connell, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, February 5, 2014.

⁹ Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview.

¹⁰ Rebekah Nazarian, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, March 7, 2014.

¹¹ Alexis C. Madrigal, “Why It’s Time for the Journal of *Porn Studies*,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/03/why-its-time-for-the-journal-of-em-porn-studies-em/284576/>.

¹² Joanna Angel, interview by author, audio recording, Los Angeles, CA, October 3, 2010.

¹³ Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Siouxsie Q, “Authentically Yours: Feminist Porn Gets Political,” *SF Weekly*, April 16, 2014, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://www.sfweekly.com/2014-04-16/culture/whore-next-door-feminist-porn-authenticity/>.

¹⁶ Tobi Hill-Meyer, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Former porn performer Candida Royalle founded Femme Productions and began to produce and distribute her own pornography in 1984.

²¹ Dorothy Allison, "Conceptual Lesbianism," in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of NC Press, 1991), 141.

²² Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 313.

²³ As elaborated by Mireille Miller-Young, in "Hip-Hop Honeyz and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography," *Meridians* 8:1 (2008), 264: "the illicit erotic economy symbolically and strategically produces gender identities through the commodification and manipulation of private (sex) acts."

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