

**Rethinking Gender and Agency in Pornography:
Producers, Consumers, Workers, and Contexts
(First Part)**

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Editorial

1. Introduction

Pornography has long been considered a hot-button issue, eliciting a variety of responses from feminists, lawmakers, and ordinary citizens that range from disgust to desire, condemnation to celebration, indignation to indifference. Porn's ability to fascinate, titillate, and even anger is evident in the almost daily deluge of headlines and news stories that amplify ideas about porn addiction, revenge porn, children and online harm, women making porn, women watching porn, Twitter porn, Tumblr porn, gay porn, straight porn, queer porn, and trans porn.

Despite this widespread interest, it remains the case that for many people pornography is perceived as a “problem” in need of a solution, rather than a complex set of cultural practices that deserve to be studied with the same rigor reserved for other, less unruly subjects. Australian lawmakers, for example, are considering using facial-recognition technology to verify the age of porn users (Tarabay 2019), while more than a dozen U.S. states have declared pornography to be a public health crisis (see Glazer 2016). Meanwhile, social media companies such as Twitter and Instagram are locking or deactivating the accounts of porn workers in an effort to crackdown on sexual content, severely undermining performers’ ability to harness these platforms as potential revenue generating streams (see Pezzutto this issue).

Since the early days of the feminist sex wars the issue of gender has loomed large in discussions about pornography and its effects (Vance 1984; Duggan and Hunter 1995; Jensen 2007; Dines 2010; Long 2012). A multibillion-dollar industry with a global reach, pornography has historically been perceived as a “guy thing,” an industry by and for men that relies on the sexual subjugation of women to make a profit. In this schema, men are reduced to predatory capitalists and consumers, while women who work in porn are stripped of agency and autonomy over their bodies and frequently positioned as “damaged goods” who turn to pornography as the result of prior sexual or physical abuse (see Griffith *et al.* 2013). These stereotypes are powerful and enduring. Writing in the 1980s, media scholars Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage noted that, «Porn bookstores, magazine racks, and theaters stand as a visual expression of male dominance of public space... Commercial pornography is men’s turf. It not only obsessively repeats male sexual fantasies, often misogynist, it also reinforces more generalized male heterosexual privilege to express and define sexuality» (1985).

The formulation of pornography’s “problem” as one not only about sex, but also gender has influenced a great deal of writing about, research on, and clashes over pornography. The intractability of these arguments, moreover, including the heteronormative gender hierarchy they naturalize, ultimately limits the kinds of questions that researchers, journalists, and policymakers ask. There is a pressing need, therefore, to rethink how we grapple with questions of gender and agency in pornography in an effort

to move beyond the essentialist and heteronormative assumptions that shape our understanding of this extremely popular and profitable form of sexual culture.

This special issue of «*AG-About Gender*» contributes to the growing academic literature on pornography by engaging with pornography's complex relationship to gender, agency, and power in a myriad of local contexts, including Italy, Australia, the Czech Republic, and the United States. The result is a truly international collection of interdisciplinary scholarship that utilizes a variety of research methods to examine producers, performers, texts, and contexts in a rapidly transforming industry, one in which ideas about authenticity, agency, objectification, intimacy, and personal branding are perhaps more important than ever.

2. The Feminist Sex Wars

Controversies over pornography are nothing new. As historian Whitney Strub notes in his detailed account of postwar American struggles over obscenity, pornography «possesses the capacity to be 'discovered' on a periodic basis» (2011, 12), mobilizing its foes and galvanizing supporters. From anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock's focus on stamping out smut in the late nineteenth century to feminist concerns about the sexist debasement of women to more recent efforts to characterize pornography as a public health crisis, antipornography campaigners, in the United States and elsewhere, have used various strategies and discursive frameworks to advance their cause. In this sense, pornography is, as Walter Kendrick suggests, “not a thing but a concept,” a thought structure that “names an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue,” in which the players may change over time, but the melodrama remains the same (1987, XIII).

Although efforts to regulate and curtail the availability of pornography predate the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 80s, feminist concerns about pornography during this era largely coalesced around questions of gender, representation, agency, and harm. Sexuality, to paraphrase film scholar Linda Williams, was increasingly 'on/scene' by the start of the 1970s, and its presence and accessibility via a growing sexual consumer culture, particularly in the United States, was cause for alarm (2004, 3). For many feminists, the 1972 release of *Deep Throat* was a catalyzing moment, one that captured the

“painful truth” about how men really felt about women, the failures of the so-called sexual revolution to remedy the sexual double standard, and the culture’s inability to take female pleasure seriously (Bronstein 2011, 82). Feminists responded to the proliferation of pornography by founding organizations, such as Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (Wavpm) and Women Against Pornography (Wap), staging protests, picketing porn theaters, drafting legislation, and embarking on what would eventually become a mass movement to stop the spread of pornography.

By the start of the 1980s, antipornography feminists had flooded the channels, drowning out competing viewpoints and villifying those who made them. They argued that the pornography industry fostered a cultural climate that was fundamentally hostile toward women (Bronstein 2011). Author and activist Andrea Dworkin, for example, theorized that pornography «conditions, trains, educates and inspires men to despise women, to use women, to hurt women» (1980, 289). Susan Brownmiller argued it was the «undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda» (1980, 32). Robin Morgan famously asserted that «pornography is the theory and rape is the practice» (1980, 139).

These claims did not go unchallenged, and came to a head in 1982 as feminists clashed at Barnard College’s Scholar and the Feminist Conference in New York City (see Comella 2008; Bronstein 2015). Conference organizers had sought to restore a sense of balance to conversations about female sexuality that had been eclipsed by anti-pornography perspectives that focused almost exclusively on female victimization. In particular, they wanted to highlight the place of sexual pleasure in women’s lives, arguing that feminism needed robust analyses that could speak «as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger» (Vance 1984, 3; see also Duggan and Hunter 1995).

Anti-censorship feminists, including Carole Vance, Gayle Rubin, Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle and others, not only advocated for more nuanced analyses of the social structures that condition female sexuality and desire, but they also rejected rigid gender binaries that uncritically positioned men as sexual agents and aggressors and women as passive objects and sexual victims. They criticized the sexual double standard in which men were understood as having a fundamental right to sexual pleasure and entertainment, but women’s sexuality was relegated to the privacy of the home, a domesticated

“safe zone” that was divorced from the less respectable and morally suspect realm of commercial sexuality (see Vance 1984; Juffer 1998; Comella 2017). A social constructionist approach to feminist theorizing about gender and sexuality was beginning to take shape, destabilizing previously taken-for-granted ways of thinking about gender, sex, and social power (Comella 2008) and helping to «clear the intellectual ground» for both queer theory and transgender studies (Stryker 2008, 218).

It was against this fractious and polarized backdrop that research on pornography’s effects began to appear. An early example emerged from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1968 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. The commission’s mandate was to broaden the factual basis for future discussions about obscenity and pornography by initiating an extensive program of social science research upon which to base any legislative recommendations. Drawing upon survey and experimental data, the commission’s findings, which were released in 1970 after President Johnson had left office, surprised many and caused immediate uproar by concluding that there was no evidence to support the argument that exposure to or use of pornography was harmful. The commission determined that pornography did not cause crime, delinquency, or sexual deviancy; rather, it found that «much of the ‘problem’ regarding materials which depict sexually explicit activity stems from an inability or reluctance of people in American society to talk openly and directly when dealing with sexual matters» (Report 1970, 53). The report’s dissenters described the research as “shoddy” and found the claim that pornography was harmless to be “preposterous” (Report, 457). Outraged by what they viewed as a “Magna Carta for the pornographer” (457), the U.S. Senate voted sixty to five to reject the report’s recommendations.

Fifteen years later, another presidential commission on pornography reached a very different conclusion about pornography’s effects. Convened in 1985 at the height of Ronald Reagan’s culture wars, the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, spearheaded by Edwin Meese III, was tasked with finding new ways to address the continuing problem of pornography, which was viewed as wreaking havoc on the institutions of marriage and family. Stacked with commissioners who had already gone on record opposing pornography, the panel relied largely on anecdotal accounts rather than empirical evidence, arguing that pornography degraded wom-

en and caused violence and should thus be strictly regulated. In her astute analysis of the “public theater” surrounding the hearings, anthropologist Carole Vance noted that the commission’s agenda on pornography was a «proxy for a more comprehensive program about gender and sexuality, both actively contested domains where diverse constituencies struggle over definitions, law, policy, and cultural meanings» (Vance 1997, 30).

By the time the Meese Commission Report was released in 1986, there was a growing body of literature about pornography and the politics of sexuality, with a number of influential books and anthologies emerging from within feminist activist and academic circles: *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (Lederer 1980); *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Dworkin 1981); *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (Snitow et al. 1983); *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance 1984), to name just a few. The history of the feminist sex wars, and the competing positions each side staked out about pleasure and danger, empowerment versus harm, consent versus coercion, and “good” versus “bad” images, became – and arguably still remain – orienting standpoints that researchers must address, even when their stated goal is to move beyond their limits.

3. Feminist Interventions

The 1989 publication of Linda Williams’s *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* established pornography as a topic worthy of academic research, helping set the stage for what would eventually become the field of porn studies (see Williams 1989; 2014; Attwood and Smith 2014). Williams argued that hard core heterosexual pornography was not a self-evident truth, but rather a system of representation with its own history, generic conventions, and narratives about gender and power; and while the genre of hard core is indeed very patriarchal, according to Williams, it is neither “a patriarchal monolith” (269) nor a closed system of representation. In other words, the social meaning of pornography ultimately depends on its treatment of sex, or how a sexual scene is lit, shot, and edited.

By the time *Hard Core* was published, feminist filmmakers and cultural producers, such as Candida Royalle, Nan Kinney, and Debi Sundahl, who founded Femme Productions and Fatale Video, respectively, in 1984, were already experimenting with how to re-present female sexuality and pleasure in an effort to «interrupt the male gaze through the subversion of the standard photographic practices utilized by more traditional forms of pornography» (Magnet 2007, 580). So, too, was the team at «On Our Backs», an erotic magazine for the “adventurous lesbian,” which published its first issue also in 1984. The San Francisco-based magazine featured erotic fiction and sexually explicit pictorials that defied stereotypes about the kind of sex lesbians were having. Shar Rednour, who worked at «On Our Backs» and its sister company Fatale Media in the early 1990s, recalled that «The reality of lesbian sex – what it looked like and the pleasure it could produce – were simply not images that were readily available or accessible in the 1980s and 1990s» (2015, 176). These images were powerful; they were also political. As Carol Queen has noted:

«On Our Backs» really tackled the argumentative perspective that you needed to take on sex-negative feminism, but it [also tackled] the positive aspects of showing alternative kinds of porn and giving space to alternative sexualities. «On Our Backs» took all of that very seriously and was at the heart of San Francisco in the eighties...they inspired not just lesbians, but everybody with the work they were doing (Queen 2008, 282).

The idea of “giving space to alternative sexualities,” those sexual identities, practices, and desires that were underrepresented or not represented at all in mainstream heterosexual hard core pornography, is at the heart of feminist and queer pornography, genres represented by an international roster of filmmakers that include Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano, Tristan Taormino, Courtney Trouble, Madison Young, Shine Louise Houston, Nenna Joiner, Jennifer Lyon Bell, Ms. Naughty, Gala Vanting, and Erika Lust, among others. These filmmakers do not exist in isolation, but are part of a much larger sex-positive eco-system of feminist sex educators and sex shops, such as Good Vibrations, Babeland, and Good For Her, that provide inspiration and, importantly, distribu-

tion networks for films that more mainstream outlets are not always interested in carrying (see Comella 2013; 2017; Queen 2015).

As variations of pornography have proliferated, and pornography's reach has expanded due to both technological and cultural shifts, research on pornography has also broadened beyond a focus on texts and their effects to address new kinds of new questions, such as: «What are the material and discursive conditions in which different kinds of pornography are produced, distributed, obtained and consumed?» (Juffer 1998, 2). While a detailed literature review is beyond the scope of this introduction, porn studies scholars are increasingly utilizing interview methods, ethnographic field work, and focus groups to go «further behind the scenes» (Voss 2012, 404) to shed light on industry business practices and the experiences of producers, performers, and consumers. Why, for example, do people watch porn? (Smith *et al.* 2015). What knowledge do porn viewers bring to bear when they assess the pornography they are watching? (Crutcher 2015). What turns women on? (Smith 2007). How do black female porn performers simultaneously resist and conform to the racial fantasies that define both their representations and conditions of labor? (Miller-Young 2014) How do discourses of authenticity impact porn's labor processes? (Berg 2017). Why do transgender porn performers rely on adult webcamming to provide a dependable source of income? (Pezzutto 2018). Questions of gender and agency are not peripheral to this research, but are a central component.

Porn workers have also in recent years emerged as increasingly important voices and collaborators in porn studies scholarship. In *The Feminist Porn Book* (Taormino *et al.* 2013), for example, more than half of its twenty-six chapters are authored by feminist, queer, and transgender porn performers and directors, deeply enriching our understanding how industry workers «contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type and other identity markers» (Ivi, 9). The collection decenters the often detached and authoritative pronouncements of scholars by positioning industry insiders as both experts and theoreticians. Although many of the book's contributors identified as feminists before they started working in porn, others began thinking of themselves as feminists as a result of experiencing new forms of sexual agency and visibility through porn performance. In the case of perform-

er Dylan Ryan, for example, it took winning a Feminist Porn Award to finally see herself as others saw her: as a feminist porn performer who, through her on-camera performances, represented feminist ideals about sexual empowerment and awareness (2013). In her essay *A Question of Feminism*, former adult performer Sinnamon Love notes that while there are numerous examples of white women's sexualities in pornography, there are far fewer depictions of African American women, and the ones that do exist are often fetishized images created by predominantly white male directors with white male viewers in mind. During her time in the industry, Love worked to challenge racial stereotypes and expand representations of black women and men in pornography, including pushing for more diverse portrayals of black couples. «My sex-positive feminism is not separate from my black feminism», she writes (2013, 104).

Sexual agency, authenticity, and consent have particular currency within feminist and queer porn communities. For performers, these are not abstract concepts divorced from their lived experiences, but are skillfully negotiated practices. Having a say in what they do on camera and who they have sex with is for many performers a mark of an ethical porn set; and for directors, making sure performers are paid well and taken care of on set, including simple things like providing healthy snacks and secure places for them to store their personal belongings, are part of creating a comfortable, positive work environment. Performer Lorelei Lee notes that the first time she was ever asked the question, “What do you want to do?” was on a porn set.

There is a kind of irony in the fact that people so often link pornography with coercion, when it is on porn sets that I really learned to give consent. Never in a civilian sexual encounter had I ever been explicitly asked what I was and wasn't willing to do with my body (Lee 2013, 209).

This special issue of «*AG: About Gender*» continues the tradition of featuring the perspectives of porn performers alongside the research of scholars. In her interview in this issue, adult performer jessica drake reflects on her twenty-year career performing in mainstream pornography, including how the industry has changed over time. As drake notes:

I think we are at a crossroads right now. We are stuck between what existed before, the more corporate mentality, and what inevitably has become more important to fans, which is interaction. Performers have more agency, and often more authenticity, when they have control over the content they are creating.

Indeed, it is this particular juncture, the crossroads between porn's recent past and its immediate present, that the collection of articles (See Popolla's Editorial in this issue) in this issue engage with in an effort to foreground and rethink gender and agency in pornography in fresh and analytically robust ways.

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