

“HOW DID YOU GET INTO THIS?: NOTES FROM A FEMALE PORN SCHOLAR.”³⁹

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In 2006 at my first academic conference presentation, I presented the very first essay I wrote on pornography. It concerned US slavery rhetoric in interracial pornography and a professor asked if I had considered the way my presentation replicated the pornographic material I was critiquing. I had not. Furthermore, I did not understand what she meant. I was not an exclusive porn scholar at that time, and naively assumed that porn studies would be treated like any other field. During my time working in trauma studies, I had never been asked about unwittingly replicating the content of the rape and incest testimonials I had been analyzing.

Since that professor's warning, I have experienced a series of awkward, sometimes offensive, and often humorous interactions with people who see my chosen subject as either potentially polluting, as an opportunity to discuss the gritty details of their sex life, or, in the more egregious cases, a free pass to make a pass. I recall the day that I decided to stop telling civilians what I study. At a party, two drunk male friends-of-friends asked me what my graduate work was on. I went to answer, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw my friend staring at me, slowly shaking her head, “no.” “Film and gender studies,” I answered, and have continued to answer ever since.

The porn scholar, while never as maligned or stigmatized as the sex worker, must tread carefully within academia. We are “disseminators of pornography” as Mark Jones and Gerry Carlin put it, “not exactly producers, but almost certainly falling within the popular and political definitions of pornographers” (60). Seen as either sites of contamination or passive receptacles of the evils of pornography, the porn scholar becomes an agent of pornography, the subject of pornography, and a pornographic object. She both transmits pornographic content, and embodies it at the same time. Women, in particular, occupy a special place in this schema.

³⁹ This article is an expanded version of a conference paper from 2013 at SCMLA, called “How Did You Get Into This?: The Porn Scholar as Pornographic Subject.”

Pornography historian Lisa Z. Sigel observes, “What people want to know is how does pornography make me feel, or more to the point, does it turn me on? The leap from my study of sex to the study of me studying sex seems automatic and reflexive” (241). “Porn” tends to be assumed to mean “heterosexual porn for heterosexual men,” with women as the object of consumption rather than the arbiter of meaning. As Sigel puts it, as a female, “I don’t *have* position; I *am* positioned.” I too am regaled with questions by academics, acquaintances, and students alike, all of who seem to want to know how a nice girl like me could be studying a topic so nasty, and if I am willing to study this subject, perhaps I’m not so nice after all.

PORNSPLAINING

Sigel remarks on the ways in which “[y]oung, female scholars looking at sexuality disrupt the political agenda of social control by inverting the one-way process of communication” (250). White, elite men controlled the production and distribution of pornography in the nineteenth-century, and to a lesser extent still do (though, thanks to advances in technology and literacy, the “elite” aspect is no longer as much of a factor). Moreover, in spite of the development of “women’s” porn and a thriving feminist porn movement,⁴⁰ “Porn” as an uninterrogated hegemonic media form is still regarded as a masculine and male dominion. My intrusion on this space, threatening to breach the homosocial sanctity of porn with my feminist and queer analysis, results in defensive gestures such as what I call “pornsplaining.” “Mansplaining” is a term popularized by feminist social media over the last few years to describe the act of a man explaining things to women in a condescending manner, usually when it is evident that the woman is just as, or more, qualified on the subject.⁴¹ Pornography, that realm so traditionally “for men,” offers up a peculiarly ripe sphere in which men feel the need to instruct and inform women. As a colleague once pornsplained to me, men inherently know more about pornography than women because they grow up watching it, and because men lie to women.⁴² Therefore, our

40 For an extended discussion of feminist porn, see the edited collection, *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, eds. Tristan Taormino et al.

41 The concept originates from Rebecca Solnit’s 2008 essay, “Men Explain Things to Me.” The term “mansplaining” soon followed, and there are now hundreds of articles and websites dedicated to the phenomena.

42 The latter part of this explanation intrigued me, as it suggested that the colleague thought men do not lie to each other, and in turn betrayed a lack of understanding regarding the way gender functions in social settings.

research could not possibly be accurate.⁴³ This need is made all the more profound when you take into consideration the disdain with which our culture treats pornography. Indeed, in fan forums a common response to my analytical interventions is to decry, “It’s just porn!” thereby ending the discourse via the suggestion that I am investing too much thought in something that is void of meaning; that it is mere masturbatory material. Another method of halting discourse is to simply highlight that I am a woman and/or a feminist. This is an effective tactic in that it suggests all ideas and critiques I put forth that challenge the status quo are the result of my being a feminist woman and therefore irrelevant to the male sphere. It is very easy to dismiss a female porn scholar’s findings—my ten years of research can be outmatched by one man’s lifetime of casual pornhub browsing. If the threat of the female scholar of porn is the threat of inverting the social controls of porn, then pornsplaining is the effort to wrestle back this control and re-insert male mastery of the subject, thereby reducing the female scholar back to her object status.

Critical Distance

In his infamous bibliography of obscene literature, *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877), “Pisanus Fraxi” (Henry Spencer Ashbee’s pseudonym) is careful to stress the unerotic nature of his tome:

“I give only so much as is necessary to form a correct estimate of the style of the writer, of the nature of the book, or the course of the tale, not sufficient to enflame the passions. [...] My extracts on the contrary will, I trust and believe, have a totally opposite effect, and as a rule will inspire so hearty a disgust for the books they are taken from, that the reader will have learned enough about them from my pages, and will be more than satisfied to have nothing further to do with them. As little, it is my belief, will my book excite the passions of my readers, as would the naked body of a woman, extended on the dissecting table, produce concupiscence in the minds of the students assembled to witness an operation performed upon her.” (quoted in Gibson 52)

Not only is Ashbee eager to assuage fears of readerly contamination, but he also wishes to distance himself from the erotic charge of his subject, as demonstrated in his medical student analogy. Little had changed in 1989, when Linda

⁴³ It is important to note at this stage that fan cultures and the experiences of men who grow up invested in pornographic media are vital perspectives in porn studies. However, women also grow up invested in various pornographies, both hegemonic pornographies and less visible ones. The fact that men are privileged as the “true” pornographic consumers is telling and serves as evidence for my point. For an analysis of female porn consumption that challenges these monolithic notions of “porn,” see Jane Juffer’s *At Home With Pornography: Women, Sexuality, and Everyday Life*.

Williams attempted a neutral and indifferent approach to porn, later coming clean in the revised 1999 edition: “I increasingly suspect that indifference is fruitless and that some sort of admission of ‘vulnerability’ and interest is preferable. I thus hereby admit, retrospectively, to all prospective readers of this book to a genuinely ‘prurient interest’ in the genre of pornography that is not quite owned up to in the first edition” (*Hard Core* xi). I have been asked probing, skeptical, and even demanding questions regarding my relationship with and investment in hardcore porn. People routinely ask, “What do you *do* when you watch these films?” or ask hopefully, “You watch them analytically...*right?*” These people, in their desire to be reassured of my lack of sexual arousal when watching pornography, do not recognize that they are in fact asking about my sex life, my masturbatory habits, and just what exactly goes on when someone like me watches films like that. For, while many people might assume that the perceived threat of pornography lies in offense, in reality the threat tends to be located in arousal. In other words, how can a scholar of pornography think straight? They must watch those movies in an entirely genitally-removed fashion. *Right?* More interesting to me is why people do *not* ask these questions concerning textual engagement of those studying other forms of literature, art, and media. If we did ask these questions, what kinds of informative responses might they yield?⁴⁴

Another question I am persistently asked is, “are you anti or pro?” I repeat the same response—“neither”—every time I am asked, much to the questioner’s perplexity. What interests me about their subsequent assumption that I must be pro, is the way in which this renders me suspect as a scholar, a teacher, and a person. My refusal to condemn pornography, in many peoples’ eyes especially antiporn scholars, reduces me to a) a threat to young students, and b) unfit for fair and balanced scholarship.⁴⁵ At the root of this seems to be the perception that having

44 I perform a similar inversion in daily life with the term “use.” Pornography is routinely framed as a media product one “uses” rather watches or reads in a rhetorical effort to cast porn as a drug. Rather than attempting to counter this trend, I ask of others in what ways we “use” the various other genres and media forms we consume.

45 The accusation of biased scholarship became headline news recently with the inaugural publication of the journal, *Porn Studies*. Gail Dines remarked in *The Observer*, “[The editors] are leaping to all sorts of unfounded conclusions. It’s incredibly important that we study the porn industry, porn culture, porn’s effect on sexual identities. It’s become a major part of our lives. But these editors come from a pro-porn background where they deny the tons and tons of research that has been done into the negative effects of porn. They are cheerleaders for the industry. And to offer themselves as these neutral authorities is just laughable. Have a journal but you’ve got to have a plurality of voices on the editorial board and there simply isn’t. There’s a pornographer on it, for God’s sake [Tristan Taormina] [*sic*]” (Cadwalladr). *Observer*, background where they deny the

consumed vast quantities of smut and having emerged without a blanket condemnation of the genre, the subject must be contaminating the researcher. This receptiveness to the contaminating effects of porn are gendered; female porn scholars who are not antis must be suffering from “false consciousness” or be otherwise brainwashed by this hardcore propaganda, while males are always already perverse, and thus naturally inclined to accept the messages pornography offers. Indeed, porn consumers, presumed male and straight, are often regarded as passive, unthinking, masturbatory receptacles of pornographic texts. Phrases such as “porn drift” meaning the desire for increasingly bizarre and extreme content stemming from desensitization indicate the ways in which we regard pornography as especially insidious to its viewers. Porn is the only genre of media that its viewers are referred to as “using.” Meanwhile, porn scholars who are not prohibitionists are, to use Gail Dines’s phrase, “cheerleaders for the industry” (Cadwalladr) at best, and pimps at worst. It was with particular interest, then, that I read of the Jammie Price case. The entire oeuvre of anti-porn feminism espouses an absolute rejection of pornography’s insidious pull⁴⁶, and for this reason the case of Jammie Price has proven especially disconcerting to anti-porn activist and professor Gail Dines.

In March of last year, tenured professor Dr. Jammie Price was suspended by her home institution, Appalachian State University, following student complaints about “inappropriate materials.” These complaints stemmed from a screening of the anti-porn documentary, *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality and Relationships* in her sociology class. Price’s suspension is unique in that it has prompted outrage on the part of anti-porn feminists who are suddenly and unexpectedly the target of censorship. The implication is that anti-porn pedagogy and scholarship is itself *pornographic*, and that anti-porn feminists are also pornographers themselves.

In her article, “The Power of the Porn Industry: The Shocking Suspension of Dr. Price,” Dines highlights the way the suspension “limit[s] the free speech of academics” and “serves to scare teachers into adhering to the hegemonic discourse,” yet she concludes her article by declaring that anything other than anti-porn pedagogy is not educational: “I think we should be speaking about porn in the

⁴⁶ An exception to this pattern is Robert Jensen who freely admits to the pull of pornography in an everyday sense, and aligns himself with all men in relation to pornography as the foundation for his argument in *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*.

classroom, but not as a fun industry that sells fantasy, but rather as a global industry that works just like any other industry with business plans, niche markets, venture capitalists and the ever-increasing need to maximize profits.” For Dines, not only are anti-porn and pro-porn perspectives impossible to include collectively in a course, but there is no middle ground between teaching porn’s harms and teaching porn as “fun.” Those who do not teach porn in terms of the evils of capitalism and damage to women are reducing students to “a captive audience for capitalists to push their products” (Dines “The Power of the Porn Industry”). In this way, “free speech” becomes a very specific type of speech that adheres to Dines’ anti-porn philosophy, and pro-porn discourse becomes the “hegemonic discourse” that Dines and her fellow anti-porn scholars are speaking out against. Teachers of pornography as a film genre are transformed into peddlers of smut or interested parties in the back pocket of sinister big business. For this reason, Price’s student complaints about the screening of “inappropriate materials” are particularly unsettling for Dines (a consultant and interviewee for the documentary) as it erases the boundary she and others like her have worked so hard to construct: the boundary between scholars who promote and thereby produce pornography, and scholars who critique it.

The “problem” with teaching pornography is the inherently pornographic nature of the pedagogy. To teach pornography is to display pornography is to render the classroom pornographic. Jones and Carlin note, “Academia and its critical authority is not perceived as immune to pornography’s contaminating discursive power” (64). Anti-porn pedagogy is no exception. Jones and Carlin explain that anti-porn feminist displays of pornography that became common in the 1980s are “framed by politically activist discourses” (61) yet as Price’s student complaints demonstrate, the intent and framing of the display make it no less of a display.

Regardless of intention, the message received and reaction provoked is not guaranteed. Furthermore, as Jones and Carlin point out, the academic interest in pornography as an undergraduate subject stems from feminist anti-porn pornographic displays:

The engagement with pornography in university-based research—other than in psychological and sociological effects studies, and legal discourse on obscenity—is largely subsequent to the feminist anti-pornographers’ explicit activities. Rather than making pornography unacceptable or extinct, it seems as though the informed engagement with pornography by campaigners for censorship succeeded only in stimulating other forms of intellectual enquiry into the subject. (61)

Dines does not see Price's suspension as connected to such Foucaultian phenomena, nor indicative of a need for further interrogation of pedagogical displays of pornography. Rather, she sees Price's suspension as indicative of academia's wider complicity in the porn industry's capitalist ventures.

In addition, Dines' response, which foregrounds her belief that the documentary's anti-porn stance is the *reason* for the suspension and that higher education is simply another institution complicit in the mainstreaming of porn, ignores key issues in Price's particular situation. The fact that Price did not warn students beforehand of the graphic sexual materials they were about to witness—a fact that played a key role in her suspension—is ignored by Dines in favor of forwarding a simplified argument that the determining factor was Price's anti-porn stance. If Price were screening a documentary that did not condemn porn, Dines suggests, but were just as graphic it would not have resulted in Price's suspension.

Are we to presume that students will only be "triggered" by sexual material? Are we to imagine that only research in sexual materials lead to the insidious desensitization and faulty scholarship of the academic? What about violent or religious material? Does education mean non-offensive education? Are educators to protect students from dealing with material they find upsetting? Are course texts to be ignored in favor of what the student would prefer to not address? Reactions to and preparations for offense not only perpetuate the idea that sex and sexual representation should offend, but also validate the notion that "offense" is a reason not to learn. It marks "offense" as the end of an interrogation as opposed to the beginning of one. Why are laughter, fear, and other responses treated as valuable starting points for discussion, yet offense is not? Jenkins reflects that "however neutrally crafted, these policies are framed with specific ideological assumptions in mind. No one requires you to warn students that the Disney movie you are about to show contains sexist, racist and homophobic content" ("Foreword" 4). Furthermore, are we really warning students, and anyone else who attends talks like this one, to guard them from being offended? Or is the real threat the possibility of sexual arousal?

Linda Williams's student evaluations demonstrated that, in spite of any offense or upset experienced from the screenings, they had understood Williams's goal "to expose students to diversities of pornography and the dynamics of the genre so as to

make them aware that the appeal to the censorship of pornography is an appeal to the censorship of diverse sexualities” (“Porn Studies” 19). The study of genre and feminist debates about pornography were the least interesting to Williams’s students: “To them, pornography was much more interesting as a springboard for discussion and demystification of the sex acts and sexualities we always seem to talk around in other contexts” (“Porn Studies” 20). This last reflection points toward the need for porn literacy in an age of increased accessibility but decreased open discussion of pornographic convention and sexual representation.

OBJECTIFICATION

Ironically, antiporn feminists subject women to a similar objectification. While Sigel and others⁴⁷ argue that the pornographic content of antiporn scholarship constitutes the very pornography it claims to oppose, antiporn feminists are also guilty of harassing and sexually belittling porn scholars in a similar fashion to the male subjects above. This is often done in subtle fashion, and can be witnessed in the index to Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*: look up “prostitute” and you will find yourself redirected to “whores” (296). More disconcertingly, following a series of high profile publications on erotic labor, UCSB graduate student Heather Berg found herself on the receiving end of radical feminists’ wrath: “I got lots of emails from self-identified anti-porn feminists demanding that I self-disclose 1) am I or had I been a sex worker 2) was I sexually abused and 3) how do I feel about being a scab to fellow women by using looks to get by?” Berg remarks, “the prurience and sense of entitlement I see in anti-porn feminists is far greater than the average sex work consumer. And the latter are better at respecting boundaries.”⁴⁸

In my own experiences in screening documentaries, giving guest lectures, and participating in roundtable discussions, students of all ages are eager to learn about the genre and untangle their own conflicted feelings on the subjects of pornography

47 See Harriet Gilbert’s “So Long As It’s Not Sex and Violence: Andrea Dworkin’s *Mercy*,” Naomi Morgenstern’s “‘There Is Nothing Else Like This’: Sex and Citation in Pornogothic Feminism,” and Greta Wendelin’s “A Rhetoric of Pornography: Private Style and Public Policy in ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.’” In Wendelin’s essay, she uses the notorious nineteenth-century journalistic piece by William Stead as a way of arguing that pornographic rhetoric in the name of fighting sexual exploitation is counterproductive.

48 Berg, Heather. E-mail interview. 19 July 2014.

and sex media. This eagerness, as well as the genuine anxiety surrounding sexual politics, technology, and the content of pornography, demonstrates the need for honest, informed, and dynamic pedagogies of pornography. These anxieties and the lack of discourse around sexuality are also the reason for the manner in which (female) porn scholars become objects and subjects of porn: we are one of the only “safe” outlets for sexual discourse, and as women we are sites of inquiry. As Sigel observes, in pornographic literature “the stock character of a young girl...functions as a main site for working out ideas of sexuality” (246). In academia, women continue to occupy this site. This is evidenced in the common query, “Have you ever been in porn?” or “Do you plan to be in porn?” Porn scholar Sarah Stevens regards this line of inquiry in two ways: “It’s different depending on where it is said, who says it, [and] what they intend to do by saying it. Sometimes, from people in the Feminist Porn Community it’s a way of saying, “Hey, your intervention in our body of work would be welcomed,” [and] sometimes I think it’s a way for people to dismiss the idea of porn being a legitimate or relevant object of study. Other times it’s said with disgust, contempt, or dismissal, and sometimes, with fascination and a way to demand my sexual availability to them.”⁴⁹ Our academic credentials, and the “professional” contexts within which these conversations take place, serve as buffers for the various discourses on sex and porn that the public are typically denied. Even when rooted in genuine curiosity, the outpouring of relieved and open dialogue about porn and sex can often feel like an uninvited assault, highlighting the need for multifaceted research and pedagogy, not one-sided condemnation or celebration, that the specifics of this diverse and problematic genre can be deconstructed and defanged.

As a young scholar in this field, eager to avoid sexual harassment and parent complaints, but also determined to avoid the dry and frankly disingenuously distanced scholarship of the past, I am left with a series of research questions:

- How does a scholar of pornography establish her boundaries in social, academic, and networking environments?
- How does the scholar of pornography maintain critical distance in their research without ignoring the critical issue of arousal?

⁴⁹ Stevens, Sarah. E-mail interview. 19 July 2014.

- How does the teacher and scholar of pornography avoid becoming unwitting sexual object, subject, and disseminator of pornography, and why precisely is this a problem?
- How can educators turn problematic situations and experiences into teachable moments? How can the way gender and age problematically factor into these experiences create new avenues of research?

While these questions may seem to highlight the problems and drawbacks of researching and teaching pornographies, they should rather be taken as a reemphasis of the dire need for porn literacy and diverse porn pedagogies.

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