

# **Doing it Ourselves: Alternative pornography as activist prefiguration**

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# **Introduction**

Sex-positive feminist studies of pornography, such as Bakehorn (2010), are rare but are increasing in number, and the present research paper is intended to add to this growing body of knowledge.

Different schools of thought and ideological perspectives read porn in very different ways. The most prominent feminist approaches to porn, which include anti-porn feminism, have been very critical of pornography, attacking it on the basis of how its content and production processes are abusive to women in a variety of ways, which I explore in detail in my literature review.

Some other feminist perspectives, including sex-radical feminism, are more open to porn and see it as a complex phenomenon that can neither be wholly rejected nor wholly embraced. They acknowledge that some porn can be problematic, that some porn is more egalitarian, that most porn is probably a combination of both, and that there is still much more that porn can be that we have yet to see.

Ronald Weitzer (2010) describes two dominant paradigms dealing with sex work in the social sciences: the “oppression paradigm” and the “empowerment paradigm.” The oppression paradigm “holds that sex work is a quintessential expression of patriarchal gender relations and male domination” (Weitzer, 2010: 5). Some of this paradigm’s most prominent proponents argue that problems such as exploitation of and violence against women are inextricably bound up with sex work, and that the only way to eradicate these problems is to do away with the sex industry altogether (Weitzer, 2010). Read through this lens, pornography can only be seen as a problem.

On the opposite side of the debate, the empowerment paradigm focuses “on the ways in which sexual services qualify as work, involve human agency, and may be

potentially validating or empowering for workers” (Weitzer, 2010: 5). According to this paradigm, violence and exploitation are not intrinsic to the work but are more closely associated with its stigmatized and often-illicit status. Read through this lens, pornography is often romanticized and seen as unconditionally positive (Weitzer, 2010).

Describing both of these paradigms as “one-dimensional and essentialist,” Weitzer proposes an alternative perspective that he calls the “polymorphous paradigm,” which “holds that there is a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences” (Weitzer, 2010: 6). That is, it recognizes the “complexities and ... structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and worker’s control” in the industry (Weitzer, 2010: 6). The polymorphous paradigm thus allows much more space and flexibility for nuanced readings of pornography that combine a wide range of experiences and interpretations.

Informed by the polymorphous paradigm, this paper illustrates how an altogether different reading of pornography can contribute to a dialogue about porn that is about both oppression and empowerment, but that is also about much more. Alternative pornography, such as feminist porn, interests me because I suspect much of it can be read differently than most mainstream genres of pornography. That is, it can be read not as simply oppressive or empowering, but as an egalitarian form of cultural production that is at once critical of the status quo while also embodying and inducing social change. Rather than seeking to eliminate or embrace pornography altogether, then, I seek to explore if, how, and to what extent pornography can have socially transformative

potential and can thus be reimagined and redeployed to carve new “paths toward utopia.”<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 1 thus begins with a review of various feminist approaches to pornography, outlining some of the stances that are critical of pornography as well as those that reconcile pornography and feminism. Following that, I outline a theoretical framework that combines some elements of feminism with anarchist politics. The driving questions behind this research paper are thus: What could porn look like in a better world? And how do we get from here to there? I use shared values between feminism and anarchism to define what is meant by a “better” world (i.e. one free from domination or oppression), and anarchism provides some methodological tools for bringing about this better world. This chapter concludes with a brief outline of my methodological approach.

The theoretical framework suggests that sexual relationships and sex-related projects guided by a particular ethical orientation could be examples of experiments prefiguring the sex of a better world. Chapter 2 consists of two case studies of explicitly political queer alt porn projects in order to explore if, how, and to what extent these experiments embody, in both content and production practices, a utopian pedagogical model of social change by putting into practice a set of visions of how ethical sexual representation could work.

The first is a thematic analysis of a quasi-documentary film about a semi-fictional anarchy-feminist porn collective. In this case I will focus on the collective’s porn-making *process*, in order to study if, how, and to what extent they re-envision the production process according to their anarchy-feminist values. The second case study is of an

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is borrowed from the title of the final chapter in Cindy Milstein’s *Anarchism and its Aspirations* (2010a).

alternative porn website that espouses feminist and anarchistic values and explores if, how, and to what extent the *content* of their porn embodies their stated values.

# Chapter 1



## Literature Review

Some feminists believe that in a patriarchal social system men control women's sexuality through institutions like the family, heterosexuality and the sex industry (Scambler & Scambler, 1997: xii), but that is the extent to which most feminist perspectives agree with one another. There are various feminist perspectives on the subject of pornography; some are very critical of pornography, some are ambivalent about it, some embrace various elements of pornography while rejecting others, and some are largely uncritical of it. Many feminists think it impossible for pornography to be feminist, for it to be anything but exploitative or oppressive. Many other feminists disagree with this on at least two fronts: because such blanket statements cannot and do not account for *all* pornography, and because feminists have engaged in the creation of pornography that actively challenges these very issues.

Even though feminist disagreements over sex and sexuality in North America date back to the movement's earliest days, the debate over pornography in particular only became a matter of widespread public interest during feminism's second wave, culminating in what has been popularly termed the feminist "porn wars" or "sex wars."<sup>2</sup> Various authors have described this conflict in terms of a "war" between two polarized positions, whether between pro-sex and anti-sex feminists (see Vance & Snitow, 1984; Smyth, 1990), radical/cultural feminists and libertarian feminists (see Ferguson, 1984), radicals and sex-radicals (see Doyle & Lacombe, 1996), anti-pornography and pro-sex feminists (see Philipson, 1984), and between anti-porn and anti-anti-porn feminists (see

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<sup>2</sup> The so-called "sex wars"—within and outside of feminism—have been discussed at length in Duggan & Hunter (1995), Ferguson et al. (1984), Vance (1984b), Queen (2002), and many others.

Russo, 1987). As illustrated by Weitzer (2010), above, the “sides” of the debate are often presented as holding inflexible, opposing positions, where one side is characterized as being absolutely against pornography and the other is unquestionably in favour of it. Both positions are usually portrayed as blind to the merits of the other’s arguments (see Philipson, 1984, for example).

Rubin (1984) cautions against such polarization of the positions, and suggests that they are only constructed as such in order to justify a search for “middle ground.” She argues instead that there does not have to be a search for “middle ground” when the terms of the debate are operating on such clearly different scales (Rubin, 1984: 303). Consistent with Weitzer’s polymorphous paradigm, I recognize that the multiplicity of feminist positions on pornography cannot be reduced to a polarized debate, so instead my literature review takes a different form.

Each argument on the subject of pornography and its relationship to feminism operates according to a unique understanding of the definition, value, function, and effects of pornography, as well as of its relationship to actual sexual behaviour. It is not my intent to search for a “middle ground” that dilutes and blends all the arguments together; rather, this literature review highlights some of the more prominent points “against” and “for” pornography, to suss out the areas where both “sides” are essentially saying the same thing in very different ways, and to engage with the idea that alternative pornographies can challenge perceived problems in mainstream pornography.

Within the context of this paper, “pornography,” or simply “porn,” refers to moving and still images explicitly depicting sexual activity. Thomas (2010: 67) distinguishes pornography from other forms of sexual representation by noting that it “is

recognized by both its creators and its consumers as an instrument of sexual arousal.” My literature review and analysis focuses on Western porn made primarily in North America. Though I acknowledge that some of the authors cited or paraphrased in the following literature review may be operating according to different or unspecified definitions of porn<sup>3</sup>, I find the above definition most useful and coherent for my analysis.

### **Some Arguments Against Pornography**

Many arguments against pornography are rooted in and embraced by what Weitzer calls the oppression paradigm, but I demonstrate here how the polymorphous paradigm does them more justice. The anti-pornography movement’s early critiques of representation focused on violent images in all media, but then the focus shifted to target increasingly more sexually explicit violence and sexual representation generally (Vance & Snitow, 1984). Much anti-pornography writing and activism claims that pornography harms women on many levels, directly through the porn production process and indirectly through the porn’s content.

At the level of production, Dworkin (1993: 207) argues that porn physically and psychologically harms the women acting in porn films and posing for pornographic photographs because they are forced to participate in the first place, and because the activities in which they are participating are harmful in and of themselves. She suggests that no woman with any real options would elect to participate voluntarily in such activities. Similarly, MacKinnon (1996) claims that “all porn is made under conditions of inequality based on sex, overwhelmingly by poor, desperate, homeless, pimped women

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in *Letters from a War Zone* Andrea Dworkin defines porn as “violence against women” (1993: 207) and as “the institution of male dominance that sexualizes hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence” (1993: 267).

who were sexually abused as children” (Mackinnon, 1996: 20), thereby suggesting that no healthy, able woman with a real choice would elect to participate in creating sexual representations. She further accuses the sex industry as a whole of forcing, threatening, blackmailing, pressuring, tricking, and cajoling women into having sex for pictures (Mackinnon, 1996: 15), because “[w]omen do not want to be pornography” (66). Additionally, she claims “the appearance of consent by women in such materials could exacerbate its injury” (Mackinnon, 1996: 101-102). In this way MacKinnon sees pornography as a barrier to gender equality.

In terms of content, Dworkin believes that porn harms *all* women because it essentially trains men to hate women. “The one message that is carried in all pornography all the time is this: she wants it; she wants to be beaten; she wants to be forced; she wants to be raped; she wants to be brutalized; she wants to be hurt. This is the premise, the first principle, of all pornography” (Dworkin, 1993: 9). For Dworkin, pornography thus acts as propaganda promoting misogyny and “functions to perpetuate male supremacy and crimes of violence against women because it conditions, trains, educates, and inspires men to despise women, to use women, to hurt women” (Dworkin, 1993: 23). MacKinnon similarly argues that porn thus functions as defamation or hate speech toward women (1996: 22).

Labelle (1980) and Lederer (1999) list and describe eight common propaganda techniques used by pornography to propagate male supremacist attitudes. They are: use of stereotypes; name substitution; selective presentation of facts; lying; repetition; bold assertion of a single idea; creation of an enemy; and appeal to authority (Lederer, 1999: 376). Stereotyping involves “propagat[ing] a view of women as nothing but ‘tits and

ass’—silly creatures who exist only to be fucked, sexually used, and forgotten” (Labelle, 1980: 176). In terms of name substitution, “pornography rarely uses anything but derogatory words to describe women and women’s sexuality. ‘Cunt,’ ‘scumbag,’ ‘twat,’ ‘hot tube,’ ‘tramp,’ etc., are just a tiny sampling of the unpleasant terms routinely used in pornography to define women” (Labelle, 1980: 176). According to Lederer, “[w]omen are also referred to by animal names” such as “pets” and “bunnies” in some pornographic contexts, and “chicks,” “dogs,” and “cows” in others (1999: 377). By selection, Labelle means “pornographers present only one vision of women’s sexuality to their readers and viewers”: that is, of women as sexually subservient to men (Labelle, 1980: 176). “It establishes ideologically that women exist solely for the sexual gratification of men” (Labelle, 1980: 178). Lederer notes that “[p]ornography also lies about women,” such as the way it “portrays women as enjoying rape, torture, and brutal sex” (1999: 378-379). These messages are repeated over and again “in a thousand reiteration[sic] of a few themes,” and “assertion” refers to the aggressiveness of such messages and their repetition (Lederer, 1999: 379). For Lederer, women are pornographers’ “enemy to be ‘vanquished and subdued,’” and the final propaganda technique, “appeal to authority,” is described as “a vital technique which propaganda needs to gain respectability” and which is used to vaguely describe how “pornographers refer to famous people, experts, scholars, and other leaders” (Lederer, 1999: 380).

Russell (2002), like many other anti-porn feminists, argues that there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between pornography—even non-violent pornography—and violence. For example she claims that pornography causes child sexual abuse, rape, woman battering, femicide, and other sexual assault and abuse.

Not all anti-porn feminists completely agree with these critiques. For example, while some authors “agree with the feminist contention that pornography is (1) oppressive and misogynistic and (2) connected with sexual violence” (Cameron & Frazer, 1992: 241), they nonetheless diverge from Russell’s cause-and-effect theory of the relationship between pornography and violence against women. Another diverging perspective “selectively embraces some limited number of [portrayed] sexual practices as long as they are mutual and loving in their expression” (Chapkis, 1997: 12).

Whereas many arguments focus only on pornography, some feminists distinguish between pornography and “erotica.” Gloria Steinem, for example, describes pornography as rooted in domination and violence, force, coercion, unequal relations, and conquest, where sex is used to reinforce some inequality, while erotica is rooted in love, sensuality, warmth, and erotic mutual pleasure (Steinem, 1980: 37). Russell and Lederer (1980) similarly homogenize and deny women’s desires when they describe porn as inherently masculine because it is penis-oriented and devoid of foreplay, tenderness, caring, love, or romance (Russell & Lederer, 1980: 27). Both authors characterize women stereotypically as needing a very “vanilla” kind of sexual representation in order to be constructed as subjects by and through this representation.

Many critiques of pornography go beyond these gender-based analyses to also address how racism and other forms of oppression are involved. Collins (2000), for example, traces patterns of interlocking racism and sexism that situate pornography within colonial discourses:

Within pornography, all women are objectified differently by racial/ethnic category. Contemporary portrayals of Black women in pornography represent the continuation of the historical treatment of their actual bodies. ... African-American women are usually depicted in a situation of bondage and slavery,

typically in a submissive posture, and often with two White men. ... Black women more often were portrayed as being subjected to aggressive acts and as submitting after initial resistance to a sexual encounter. ... Black women are equated with snakes, as engaging in sex with animals, as incestuous, and as lovers of rape, especially by White men. (Collins, 2000: 137)

According to Collins, pornography actually serves as a way in which more powerful groups try to control black women's bodies (2000: 135), thereby legitimizing the racist and sexist relations between white men and women of colour. Rather than argue that black women were later added into pornography to be exploited, Collins argues that porn actually emerged as yet another way of dominating and exploiting black women, claiming that "African-American women's pornographic treatment has not been timeless and universal but emerged in conjunction with European colonization and American slavery" (2000: 138).

The racism in porn is not limited to women, however. In pornography generally and in the realm of North American gay pornography in particular, Fung criticizes porn for constructing a racial hierarchy that assigns certain masculinities to certain racialized groups of men, such as depicting black men as hypersexual and Asian men as "undersexed" or sexually passive (1991: 146).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fung notes that in the world of commercial gay sexual representation, "the images of men and male beauty are still of *white* men and *white* male beauty" (1991: 149). Films featuring racialized actors are always intended for a white audience, and the hierarchy and the use of "Oriental" signifiers in such portrayals fuels the colonial fantasy that empowers one kind of gay man over another (Fung 1991). For example, Asian men, when portrayed at all, even when stereotyped as kung fu masters, ninjas, or samurai, are "almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen asceticism" (Fung, 1991: 148). Asian men tend to be portrayed in submission to white men, "always in the role of servant" (Fung, 1991: 158), and Fung suggests that the gay Asian viewer is thus never constructed as a sexual subject in any of this work (1991: 158). During intercourse, Asian men almost invariably play the "bottom"—that is, the submissive role in a sexual encounter—to white men, and are penetrated as an act of submission rather than pleasure (Fung, 1991: 152-3).

Rubin (1984) and Segal (1990) agree that some mainstream pornography is deeply sexist and racist and “is a significant part of the general sexist, racist and misogynistic climate and culture of our times” (Segal, 1990: 38). However, they suggest that other genres of media and in fact most elements of our culture are no different. Segal says that it is thus “legitimate and necessary to engage in criticism of [pornography],” but then asks, “in objecting to sexism, racism and misogyny, should we not tackle *all* sexist and racist representations of women, rather than reduce these to the explicitly sexual and call upon what are probably spurious connections between pornography and violent behaviour?” (Segal, 1990: 38-39). She argues that narrowing the focus on sexism to instances of pornography actually “downplays the sexism and misogyny at work within all of our most respectable social institutions and practices, whether judicial, legal, familial, occupational, religious, scientific, or cultural” (Segal, 1990: 32).

### **Some Critiques and Appropriations of Anti-porn Arguments**

Gail Rubin (1984) criticizes the anti-pornography movement for its tendency to attack all pornography based only on examples of some of the most violent and objectionable material—examples that are not at all representative of the genre as a whole. In particular, she criticizes much anti-porn propaganda for implying that sadomasochism is some sort of underlying and essential “truth” towards which all pornography eventually leads (Rubin, 1984). Rooted in this tendency to take instances of sadomasochism and other sexual power-play out of context and demonize all pornography on this basis, some anti-pornography feminists like Dworkin and



MacKinnon have developed an analytical framework that positions pornography as “[c]entral to the institutionalization of male dominance” (MacKinnon, 2000: 169).

Jill Nagle (1997) maintains that most analyses of and arguments against pornography concern the majority of porn—particularly that which is largely by, for, and about male desire and where women appear to serve those desires. She is describing analyses that much of the anti-pornography movement uses to create generalizations about all pornography. This generalizing has problematic implications for porn as a genre, Nagle argues, since representation of sex thus becomes conflated with only its problematic representations, such that pornography becomes equated with exploitation, violence, or objectification (Nagle, 1997). It is important to identify this representation as a distortion, or at least as *incomplete*, because it eclipses the different incarnations of the genre that do not fit the patterns described by such generalizations.

In *Letters from a War Zone* (1993), Dworkin suggests that sex between a man and a woman under patriarchy is inherently oppressive and cannot be consensual. The essence of her argument is that women have no real options and thus no real agency when it comes to giving sexual consent. When asked whether two adults “who totally and freely agree to sadomasochistic activities” should be allowed to engage in such activities, Dworkin responds that it is difficult to ascertain consent when it typically takes the form of “passive acquiescence” (Dworkin, 1993: 297-298). She adds, “feminists have to fight for a society in which we go way beyond consent as a standard for freedom, and we are talking about self-determination in a world with real choices; and right now for women, that world of real choices does not really exist” (Dworkin, 1993: 297-298). The

generality of her response indicates an indictment of all forms of sex under patriarchy, not only sadomasochistic sex.<sup>5</sup>

While I disagree with her assessment that women<sup>6</sup> (and nobody else) have limited options and thus cannot fully consent to sexual activity, I can glean some important insights from Dworkin's desire for a "higher standard of freedom," for self-determination, and for real choice—for everyone. I also find value in her implication that sex (and, by extension, sexual representation) under patriarchy is perhaps not all that it *could be* outside of a world dominated by patriarchal social relations. To extend this with a third-wave feminist analysis, I add that sexuality and sexual expression in any oppressive system<sup>7</sup> or group of oppressive systems are significantly limited by relations of domination. Key to this point is an analysis highlighting the interlocking nature of oppressions that recognizes how the various systems of oppression are firmly interconnected and interdependent—interlocking—rather than being simply additive, their mechanisms working together, and only together, to maintain particular relations of domination (Combahee River Collective, cited in Dicker, 2008: 92). In this way, I think an interlocking analysis, if followed through to its logical conclusion, leads to the anarchist and activist principle that "no one is free until we are all free"—that is, until all systems of oppression have been dismantled.

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<sup>5</sup> Upon reflection, perhaps all sex is implicitly non-consensually sadomasochistic for Dworkin, since her presumption of the impossibility of consent makes sex inherently violent and thus rape-like.

<sup>6</sup> "Women" is a problematic category generalization in itself, as it eclipses how various intersecting or interlocking oppressions give people of all genders different degrees and types of privileges and options.

<sup>7</sup> Such as racism, capitalism, statism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, agism, and increasingly more as they are brought to light by feminists and other social justice activists.

Dworkin's implication that sex cannot be egalitarian within a patriarchal system implies that in a non-patriarchal or post-patriarchal system there *can* be room for egalitarian sex and sexual representation. I interpret this to mean that pornography can be egalitarian on all fronts, not only in terms of addressing misogyny. An interlocking analysis would determine that abolishing misogyny is in fact only possible if we also abolish racism and all other forms of domination.

However, elsewhere in the same work, Dworkin argues that pornography in any form or context could not exist in an egalitarian society (1993: 244). She claims that pornography only exists because of "the male monopoly on speech," and suggests that if women had more control over the media then pornography would never have developed (Dworkin, 1993: 244). In Dworkin's view there is thus no room for pornography in feminism as she further posits that "the acceptance of pornography means the decline of feminist ethics and an abandonment of feminist politics; the acceptance of pornography means feminists abandon women" (1993: 204). She goes so far as to identify such feminists as collaborators in their own oppression. She later has the opportunity to revisit this when presented with Gloria Steinem's articulation of "erotica" as "sexually explicit material that shows mutuality and reciprocity and equality," but instead of making room for complex nuances in her argument, she simply states that this erotica does not constitute "pornography" and is thus acceptable sexual representation (Dworkin, 1993: 290). Another problem with this move is that Dworkin is implicitly determining that normative, "vanilla" forms of sexual expression are morally acceptable, while more transgressive, kinky activities and representations are unacceptable and wrong. Dworkin's ability to make such claims is in itself a form of power that serves to oppress

certain groups of people based on preferred forms of sexual expression and activity.

While I am not arguing that any and all sexual expression should be condoned at the potential expense of the well being of others, there is certainly a more nuanced and flexible approach than Dworkin's, and I explore this further in the research paper.

Part of Dworkin's argument is that "pornography functions to perpetuate male supremacy and crimes of violence against women because it conditions, trains, educates, and inspires men to despise women, to use women, [and] to hurt women" (1993: 23). Insofar as porn communicates "that women want to be hurt, forced, and abused; [...] raped, battered, kidnapped, maimed; [...] humiliated, shamed, defamed" then it has an educative function to that effect (Dworkin, 1993: 203-205) by "target[ing] and defin[ing] women for abuse and discrimination" (MacKinnon, 2000: 179). Dworkin and MacKinnon both see a causal connection between pornography's eroticization of dominance/submission relationships and systematic violence against women. Cameron and Frazer (1992) describe the method Dworkin and Mackinnon put forth as the "copycat" model: that pornography directly inspires assault. Dworkin refers to pornography as "behavioral training" and likens it to Pavlov's dog experiments, where violence is eroticized and "every single orgasm is a reward for believing that material, absorbing that material, [and] responding to that value system" (1993: 148).

I shall take a moment to engage with Dworkin's insistence, that "pornography must teach something" (1993: 208). I think it can "teach" many things. *If* it can teach all of the hate and violence that she claims it does, then, perhaps under different circumstances, can it not also teach something very different? I contend that just as some instances of pornography may effectively "teach" misogyny, racism, and other

problematic values, some pornography may, in contrast, successfully “teach” more positive values such as love, solidarity, inclusiveness, and respect. It can teach about difference and diversity, break down stigma and fear, and encourage many forms of healthy sexual interaction and expression—including ethical approaches to transgressive activities.

There are many problems with Dworkin’s work and the assumptions and generalizations she makes about “all pornography all the time” (Dworkin, 1993: 9). Still, I have chosen to engage with her here because she has been a key figure in the feminist debate around these issues, especially during the debate’s formative years in the 1980s and 1990s, and continues to be cited today.

Dworkin’s blanket accusations about pornography’s presumed harm, as well as her assertions that the acceptance of pornography is anti-feminist, leaves no room for feminists to accept or embrace any kind of pornography, or, if they are not content with its current state, to envision and create their own. MacKinnon, on the other hand, claims that pornography cannot be reformed or banned, “[i]t can only be changed” (2000: 169). Perhaps she did not intend by this statement to suggest that feminists should create their own pornography, but this is a possible interpretation.

Self-identified anti-pornography feminist A.W. Eaton (2007) recognizes the flaws in this perspective’s blanket condemnation of erotic material. She acknowledges that the anti-pornography position “has been justly criticized for ignoring the often liberatory power dynamics that characterize much gay and lesbian pornography, S/M (sadoomasochistic) pornography, and pornography made by and for women” (Eaton, 2007: 676). She instead advocates for “a sensible antiporn feminism” that specifically targets

only “inegalitarian pornography,” which she defines as “sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequity,” where “gender inequity” means endorsement of the subordination of women by men (Eaton, 2007: 676). She then concedes “that some forms of pornography may be neutral or even beneficial with respect to gender equality” (Eaton, 2007: 714).

Most importantly for my purposes, Eaton suggests that a sensible antiporn feminism should teach about the harms of inegalitarian pornography, a process that can include “seek[ing] new and creative ways to shape desires in an egalitarian direction,” such as “encouraging the production of egalitarian pornography” (2007: 693). This is significant to this paper because, even though her solution ignores the problem of racism and other oppressions in pornography and is inherently discriminatory toward some sexual minorities and practices that consensually eroticize inegalitarian relationships (such as power-play and other kink practices), she is essentially suggesting that the production of alternative pornography could be a positive, feminist project.

### **Some Arguments in Favour of Pornography**

Many arguments in favour of pornography are rooted in and embraced by what Weitzer calls the empowerment paradigm, but I demonstrate here how the polymorphous paradigm does them more justice. Brian McNair (2002) purports that the sometimes-ugly reality of what pornography *has been* (and in some cases still is) does not need to be taken as evidence of all that pornography *can be*. He claims there is nothing essentially sexist about pornography itself, and *if* much porn in circulation thus far has been thus, then not *all* of it has, and certainly none of it *needs* to be. Like other forms of

representation historically dominated by men (such as mainstream television, film, and advertising), pornography is a media genre whose content and meaning are shaped by the interaction between the values and goals of its producers and the desires of its consumers (McNair, 2002).

As such, pornography can be produced apart from or in reaction to the white supremacist, homophobic, and patriarchal values that influence mainstream forms of production and representation. Porn can also be produced for, and *by*, a consumer who desires pornographies that are more reflective of her own reality and struggle, and this can be done in ethical ways.

According to Califia (2000), pornography, rather than the individuals who commit acts of violence against women, bears the blame for violence and discrimination, and women's anger is shifted away from rapists and batterers and onto dirty magazines. According to Vance (1984a), feminism has effectively spoken out against the sexual oppression of male violence, brutality, and coercion, but it must also speak out against the repression of female desire that comes from ignorance, invisibility, and fear. We cannot hold pornography responsible for the subordination of women, since both exist in a social context where a wide range of oppressive institutions (such as the family, church, and school) play a clear role in sexual socialization (Vance & Snitow, 1984). According to Segal, "[w]hat women need ... is not more censorship but more sexually explicit material produced by and for women, more open and honest discussion of all sexual issues, alongside the struggle against women's general subordinate economic and social status" (1990: 32).

Feminist groups such as Women Against Censorship (see Segal, 1990) and Feminists Against Censorship (Rodgers & Semple, 1990), and many sex-positive and sex radical feminists such as Vance & Snitow (1984), English, Hollibaugh, & Rubin (1982), Queen (2002), Califia (2000), Hartley, in Chapkis (1997), and Gallant, in Snyder (2008), have similarly recommended the production of alternative pornography to challenge sexist, racist, sizist, and otherwise problematic elements of mainstream sexual representations. Sex-positive and sex-radical feminists tend to be more forgiving of pornography and “deviant” sexual practices, but nonetheless recognize that not everyone is happy with pornography in its current form and that some pornography does pose challenges for even the most libertarian feminists.

Queen (2002), for example, argues that making and watching pornography are ways for women to reclaim sexual entertainment, and that makes it feminist. She contends that the various ways of using pornography are, above all, ways of acknowledging desire. Further, she argues that pornography is educational: it lets us watch and listen to see what people do and to learn new things, even if it is not a template for reality (Queen, 2002). For Duggan, Hunter, and Vance (1985), pornography endorses various forms of sex practices deemed deviant or marginal and thus legitimates many women’s desires to transgress gendered sexual norms. For these reasons and more, the consumption and production of pornography can thus be a healthy contribution to feminism.

At the very least, according to Hartley (in Chapkis, 1997), pornography is harmless. In contrast with most slasher and *femme fatale* films, which portray the sexually aggressive woman as either a victim or insane, most pornography provides a



refreshing alternative by depicting a woman “desiring sex, pursuing sex, having sex, having orgasms and at the end of the movie she’s still alive, happy, healthy, and well” (Hartley, in Chapkis, 1997: 36).

The activist organization Feminists Against Censorship resists the urge to “reduce all oppression to pornography” and instead encourages the production of “sexually explicit material . . . by and for women, freed from the control of right-wingers and misogynists” as a way of tackling “issues of class and race and to deal with the variety of oppressions in the world” (FAC booklet, cited in Rodgeron & Semple, 1990: 25). The suggestion that women be responsible for producing ethical porn, however, leaves male porn producers (against whom most anti-porn critiques are directed) out of the equation entirely, and thus misses a potentially valuable opportunity to engage them in this process.

A *Bitch* magazine article by Nikko Snyder (2008) about the annual Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto discusses what it means for contemporary porn to be feminist. In an interview cited in the article, the creator of the event derides the common notion that “feminist” porn is a specific genre (i.e. softcore, erotica, storyline-based, lesbian) rather than a set of politics. She works at the local feminist-owned and -operated sex toy store and apparently started the Awards in response to racism in the mainstream pornography that kept filtering through her store. The “feminist-ness” of eligible porn films is determined by their adherence to at least two of the following three criteria: “first, a woman is substantially involved with the making of the film; second, the film depicts genuine female pleasure; and third, it expands the range of sexual expression for women by telling us something new about female sexuality” (Snyder, 2008: 23). For the

producers of some of the winning films, the meaning of what makes their work feminist varies widely. For some producers, their feminist politics are more visible in the production process—the author dubs this “Fair Trade porn”—whether by using a collaborative approach (seeking creative input from the performers, giving them power to negotiate the activities they will perform, and, in some cases, putting them entirely in charge of the details of how, when, with whom, and how often they engage sexually), by paying more than the industry standard, and/or by requiring safe sex practices and covering the costs of HIV testing (Snyder, 2008). Some producers are concerned about the context and interpretation of the activities in their films, so they include interviews with the performers about a range of topics covering anything from sexism and racism in porn to the specific activities they enjoy, including why a particular performer might enjoy rough sex and how they give or obtain consent and negotiate boundaries (Snyder, 2008). For other producers, the film is feminist because of the story it tells, such as characters dealing with sexuality and self-esteem issues in a visible minority community (Snyder, 2008). These responses help to paint a picture of the various ways an alternative porn project can be feminist.

### **Sex-radical Feminism**

Most closely aligned with Weitzer’s polymorphous paradigm is sex-radical feminism, a theoretical framework that critiques the dominant modes of power and inequality addressed by the anti-pornography feminists, but which does not succumb to their abolitionist and purificationist politics (Egan, 2006: 77). The sex-radical perspective allows for a multiplicity of complex experiences (Egan, 2006: 20), recognizing that some

women's experiences with pornography can be exploitative and abusive, that some experiences can be empowering and liberating, and that most experiences will be somewhere in between or many of these things at once. According to R. Danielle Egan, sex-radical feminism:

challenges cultural practices and discourses through acts of resistance on both a micro and macrolevel[sic] (from same sex "kiss ins" to political protest) providing an opening for other diverse sexual practices (such as S/M, nonmonogamy, bondage, fetishism, sex work) and identities (slut, queer, transgender, lesbian, bisexual, whore), often deemed deviant and marginalized. (Egan, 2006: 78)

In this way, Egan (2006) contends, sex-radical theory enables the reading and re-reading of resistance into acts that are normally read as complicit with domination. For example, a sex-radical perspective helps us understand that pornography—and certainly feminist pornography—can be understood as a site, or at least a series of moments, of resistance to patriarchal domination. I argue that some pornography can constitute more than mere resistance, but can also take the form of active attempts to change the status quo from inside and outside of the industry. We can thus understand feminist pornographies as a potential feminist response to the examples of mainstream pornography that some individuals might find problematic.

The driving questions behind this research paper are thus: What could porn look like in a better world? And how do we get from here to there?

## **Theoretical Framework**

At the core of the first question (What could porn look like in a better world?) is an ethico-political claim—that is, an idea of, and set of assumptions about, what is considered "the good society." The second (How do we get from here to there?) is a

question of method, of *how* to attain this better society. I have found a compelling theoretical framework that addresses both of these questions primarily in the works of Cindy Milstein (2008, 2010a, 2010b), as well as Mark Coté, Richard J.F. Day, and Greig de Peuter (2007), Howard J. Ehrlich (1996), and Uri Gordon (2008) on anarchism and prefigurative politics. I believe this framework addresses many key concerns also pertinent to feminists of various stripes, and perhaps provides a way forward in bridging the chasms between camps on the issues of sex, sexual expression, and sexual representation.

“First and foremost, anarchism is a revolutionary political philosophy” (Milstein, 2010a: 31)—that is, rather than addressing only the symptoms of social problems anarchists aim to transform society as a whole in order to get at their root or origin: domination. I think this notion that unequal social relationships underlie many social problems is at the core of Dworkin’s concerns, and is a basic critique that many feminists share.

Put simply, anarchism is an “ethical project of creating fully articulated social selves, who strive with others for a society of, for, and by everyone” (Milstein, 2010a: 26). “From its beginnings, anarchism’s core aspiration was to root out and eradicate all coercive, hierarchical social relations, and dream up and establish consensual, egalitarian ones in every instance” (Milstein, 2010a: 24). Milstein thus situates contemporary anarchism “unflinchingly as a philosophy of freedom, as the nagging conscience that people and their communities can always be better” (Milstein, 2010a: 12).

“Ethics within anarchism thus entails actively thinking through and trying to implement notions of goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness—even as people

remain open to discovering new forms of goodness and badness” (Milstein, 2010a: 128, endnote 4). Anarchism’s ethical content, according to Milstein, includes values such as liberation and freedom, the equality of unequals, mutual aid, an ecological orientation, voluntary association and accountability, joy and spontaneity, unity in diversity, and a philosophy of “from each according to their abilities *and passions*, to each according to their needs *and desires*” (Milstein, 2010a: 50-63; emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> While I delve into some of these in more detail later, for now I posit that these values shape everything that (consistent) anarchists do. These values are often inconsistent with the lived experiences of many people in contemporary societies and are thought to provide sustainable, viable, desirable, and ethical alternatives to the world as we know it—that is, the drudgery of life under capitalism, statism, patriarchy, and the myriad other oppressive systems that govern and thus determine the content and structure of our lives.

This leads to the methodological question of how anarchists “do” anarchism. According to Milstein (2010a), anarchism is at once “an implicit, multidimensional critique, [...] an expansive, if fragile, reconstructive vision” (Milstein, 2010a: 12), and a set of principled actions (Milstein, 2010a: 66). Anarchists must envision a better society that meets everyone’s needs and desires within a particular ethical framework. This involves imagining and planning the alternative institutions that will replace existing ones, and then actually trying them out, often in microcosm but sometimes on larger scales as well. We must try these out, and change them as necessary, and try them again, and change them again, and on and on with increasingly new ways of trying to remake society to benefit everyone and ensure maximum individual and community benefit (Milstein, 2010a). Anarchists approach everything they do by positing their core values

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<sup>8</sup> See Milstein, 2010a: 50-63, for a more fleshed-out articulation of these values.

first and then imagining and practicing how to make their vision of a better world real without compromising this ethical framework (Milstein, 2010a). Primarily, anarchists “bring forth self-determination and self-organization, self-management and self-governance, as the basis for a new society” (Milstein, 2010a: 26). As such, anarchist projects tend to be, at base, collectively organized and self-managed, regardless of whether this approach is seen as “efficient” or “effective” from a project management standpoint. Ethics supercede efficiency at every turn, and the trick is to make the projects “fit” the ethics, rather than the other way around (Milstein, 2010a; Gordon, 2008).

This is what Milstein (2010a), Gordon (2008), Graeber (2009), and others refer to as anarchism’s “prefigurative politics”—the determination to build now the world one wants to see, within the shell of the old, in ways that are consistent with the desired ends. The “ends” are the ethics themselves, in fact, and the way that a better world looks will always be changing as we find better ways of practicing, of *doing*, what we think best embodies our values.

I have devised a breakdown of the different elements of anarchist prefigurative politics by interpreting and synthesizing the aforementioned authors, since none of them adequately lays it out in a way that I can use in my analysis. As such, for the purposes of this paper, prefigurative politics includes critique, vision, and action, and embodies the following (somewhat overlapping) characteristics and motivations:

- 1) **Experiment, or Praxis:** combining theoretical ideas and visions with actual projects on-the-ground, because prefiguration is more than a thought experiment; it also tests new ways of doing things to see if they both work and embody our values, to suss out the problems and inconsistencies so we can fix them, and to constantly learn from our mistakes and shortcomings, as well as from those of others;

- 2) **Practice:** we must teach and train ourselves in new, preferred ways of doing things so that we are able to actually run our own alternative institutions when the time comes;
- 3) **Replace:** we are beginning now to actually replace the relationships, institutions, and practices we do not agree with, to make them irrelevant, because revolution and utopia are processes rather than some future moment;
- 4) **Inspire:** teaching by example what our better world can look like to people on the outside, with the expectation that they will be inspired to want what we are building and will see that it is, in fact, possible;<sup>9</sup>
- 5) **Concrete Change:** improving our current living conditions because we do not want to wait for some future “revolution”—it is about acting now as though the revolution has already happened; and
- 6) **Means-Ends Consistency:** ensuring that our ethical compass always guides our actions, and that the behaviours we engage in to build the better world directly reflect the values of that better world.

In this way, prefiguring a better world means to imagine and model that better world right now as a multilayered sort of preparation for later, and in order to build the path toward it, to create the bridge from “here” to “there” (Milstein, 2010a).

Many elements of how anarchists “do” anarchism according to Milstein (2010a) parallel Howard Ehrlich’s theory of revolutionary change (Ehrlich, 1996: 331), though the term “prefiguration” is not used in his work. This theory has three parts: “a critique of the existing society,” “a view of the kind of new society one would like,” and the assembly of ideas and practices that serve as a sort of “guide [telling] us how to get from here to there” (Ehrlich, 1996: 331). This guide, or bridge, is what Ehrlich terms a “revolutionary transfer culture” (Ehrlich, 1996: 329), where revolution itself refers not to an event but to a process of radical change and transformation (Ehrlich, 1996: 341). A revolutionary transfer culture involves “developing a set of institutions and intergroup

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<sup>9</sup> Graeber refers to this as “contaminationism” (2009: 211).

and interpersonal processes that are consistent with our image of a good society, though it is not that good society itself” (Ehrlich, 1996: 329).

This revolutionary transfer culture prefigures a version, or many versions, of utopia, which is understood “not as a place we might reach but as an ongoing process of becoming” (Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007: 13). This process of utopia means being critical of how things are while also trying to make things better, all the while acknowledging that there is no singular “correct” vision of what this means because we will always be improving upon it. This suggests that the imagined end-states are in a sense inconsequential because, wherever we end up, we will always still be in the process of improving our situation. This demonstrates, again, that the ethics, in fact, *are* the ends.

The concept of “utopian pedagogy” as articulated by Coté, Day, and de Peuter (2007), is one element of the “bridge” between “here” and “there,” or revolutionary transfer culture. It refers to “those practices which seek to propagate an awareness of the existence and possibilities of the radical outside” (Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007: 15), that “point beyond the present” (Milstein, 2008). For Milstein, a good deal of anarchist work is concerned with “gestur[ing] toward radical reconstruction” (2010a: 34), “point[ing] past” current conditions (2010a: 35), “point[ing] toward new social relations” (2010a: 63), and “point[ing] toward freedom” (2010a: 38), and utopian pedagogy is rooted in this gesturing activity, thus fulfilling and fleshing out the teaching function of prefiguration.

For feminist- and anarchist-inspired people, whose focus is on challenging and being free from domination, our transfer culture will consist of re-visioning and eventually replacing the institutions in our society with institutions that address our needs—the needs of everyone—in egalitarian, fulfilling, and respectful ways. It also,



especially, means radically reconfiguring how we organize these institutions, and will involve experimenting with always-newer principles of collective social organization—that is, ways of organizing that are not hierarchical in any respect, and where everyone matters.

Though not generally considered an “institution” per se, pornography—and sexual representation more broadly—is an important and valuable part of contemporary life that has come under heavy scrutiny by groups and individuals who challenge its moral worth and assert its ability to cause harm.

This theoretical framework, however, suggests that sexual relationships and sex-related projects guided by a particular ethical orientation could be examples of experiments prefiguring the sex of a better world. My interest lies in pornography as cultural production, and its participants as cultural producers. There are two reasons for this: studying porn that is trying to change how porn works is interesting in itself, and because cultural production tends to have effects outside of itself on the wider society. Such potentially transformative pornography is the focus of the remainder of this research paper.

Regarding the potential for cultural production to have effects on culture and other cultural production, I draw on Milstein’s reflections on “the dual role of art as vision and critique” (2010b: 26). I apply her statements about “art” to “cultural production” more generally, as she often uses the two terms interchangeably.

Art, or cultural production, plays an important role in what Milstein calls anarchism’s “reconstructive vision” (2010a: 66). It is a way of “reappropriating the imagination,” to borrow the title of her essay (Milstein, 2008). In her words,

[t]he creative act—the arduous task of seeing something other than the space of capitalism, statism, the gender binary, racism, and other rooms without a view—is the hope we can offer to the world. Such aesthetic expressions must also aim to denaturalize the present, though. And this dual “gesturing at and beyond” will only be possible if we continually interrogate this historical moment, and whether our artworks are working against the grain within that context. (Milstein, 2008: no page)

Not only is such “critically engaging and visionary art” possible or desirable (Milstein, 2010b: 31), but it is in fact “more necessary than ever” (Milstein, 2008: no page) in the “ongoing process of continually approximating a better, brighter world, where more and more of us are making that world happen—a world in which we’re more individuated and our communities are collectively self-determined and self-managed” (Milstein, 2010b: 31).

It is possible to think of cultural products such as alternative pornography as potentially transformative; that is, as projects that both reject the status quo of sexual representation and the way it is organized while also pointing to new and different possibilities—“gesturing toward utopia” (Milstein, 2010a: 65)—in the realm of representation and ways of organizing production.

Such projects have the capacity to embody anarchism’s prefigurative politics, ideas of utopian pedagogy, and the building of a revolutionary transfer culture. According to Jill Bakehorn (2010), many women involved in alt porn tend to be primarily driven to it by activist and educational motivations, because they see it as a part of their wider activist life. They see their porn as “better” than mainstream porn insofar as it provides more “accurate” representations of sex, it corrects problematic representations of various groups of people, and they believe it is changing the industry’s content and production standards (Bakehorn, 2010: 103-104). Education was a significant theme in these

motivations, such as their alt porn films' emphasis on portraying safer sex practices, the meaning of real consent, featuring real people in real positions, depicting "healthy" sexuality (Bakehorn, 2010: 107-108), and/or teaching by example how to treat actors well (Bakehorn, 2010: 104). Such research lends credence to my belief that some alternative pornography is actively trying to re-vision and transform sexual representation as we know it, at the level of content as well as production. While Bakehorn's research was primarily concerned with actors' motivations for making porn, my research focus is on the actual production practices and content of this porn.

## **Research Questions**

The driving questions behind this research paper are: What could porn look like in a world without domination or oppression? And how do we get from here to there? The main thrust of this research, then, is to explore if, how, and to what extent these alt porn experiments embody, in both their content and production practices, a utopian pedagogical model of social change by putting into practice a set of visions of how ethical sexual representation could work.

## **Method & Methodology**

The following chapter consists of two case studies of alternative pornography. Qi describes case study research as "the study of an instance in action," where "the researcher may select an instance from the class of objects and phenomena one is investigating and investigates the way this instance functions in context" (2009: 23). Case study research thus tends to be in-depth, detailed, and qualitative in nature (Qi, 2009: 23).

In relation to alt porn, this means studying instances of pornography while being mindful of their communities of origin, the intent behind their production, the context of their production, and their intended audience and viewing context.

McNair (1996) discusses the history of “alternative pornography” as it refers to gay men’s porn, lesbian porn, and porn made for heterosexual women. He explains that the majority of pornography is designed for the normative heterosexual male gaze, so each of these alternative genres exists as an alternative to the majority of pornography because it is created with a different audience in mind.

More recently, a new pornographic genre has developed that refers to itself as “alternative pornography,” “alternaporn,” or “alt porn.” Websites like *Altporn.net* and *SuicideGirls.com* tend to reflect a certain subcultural aesthetic, often taking the form of conventionally attractive, mostly white girls sporting goth and punk subcultural markers like coloured hair, tattoos, and piercings, which the websites describe as embodying an “alternative” to mainstream conceptions of beauty. The *SuicideGirls* website even claims that its erotica “redefines beauty.” A cursory glance at these websites suggests that the term “alternative” refers exclusively to the subcultural markers themselves, because the models nonetheless fit conventional standards of beauty in terms of their respective ethnicities, ages, sizes, body types, and general appearance. Magnet (2007) concludes that *SuicideGirls*’s “alternative” framing is more of a marketing tactic than an authentic feminist stance, since the actual content of the site’s images is inconsistent with feminist analyses. The stated politics of such websites are superficial at best and so these sites do not fit within the realm of my research.

For the purposes of this research, I am more interested in studying alternative pornographies that do *not* necessarily fit into either of these general categories. Most academic work about alternative pornographies does not take into account explicitly political queer porn, which is precisely the genre of alternative pornography that I explore. This subgenre of porn interests me because of the explicitness of its politics, its seeming opposition to many of the porn qualities criticized by feminists, and in general the way it appears to simultaneously resist the dominant meanings of pornography while nonetheless *being* pornography.

To answer my research question and fulfill my research objectives I perform case studies of two experiments in alternative pornography, or alt porn. They are *Made in Secret: The story of the East Van Porn Collective* (LaRue et al., 2005), a film about a semi-fictional anarchy-feminist porn collective's porn-making process, and NoFauxxx.com (<http://www.nofauxx.com/>), an alt porn website that espouses feminist and anarchistic values. Preliminary analyses suggest that these projects are faithful to their stated politics, in terms of the film's production process and the website's porn content, and my analysis in Chapter 2 explores this further. In fact, these projects are exemplary of utopian pedagogy-in-action at the level of pornography: they simultaneously critique porn's status quo, put forth a vision of porn in a better world, and engage in experimental prefigurative projects that reach toward this better world.

I chose the Vancouver-based film *Made in Secret: The story of the East Van Porn Collective* (LaRue et al., 2005; hereafter simply *Made in Secret*) because the collective porn production process it depicts is exemplary of feminist and anarchist prefigurative politics. The first in a three-part series of films on anarchy-feminist decision-making and

collective process, *Made in Secret* is less about porn and more about the process of making it according to feminist principles. As Ehrlich argues, the process of collective work is at least as important as the product of that work (1996: 344). *Made in Secret* features the only porn collective, to my knowledge, to document itself and its collective process for public access. It has been screened at seven film festivals, including internationally, and has won two film festival awards.

Similarly, I chose the American website NoFauxxx.com (hereafter simply NoFauxxx) because of its history and its stated values. Its mission statement about the content of its porn exemplifies the values of a feminist or anarchist porn project. NoFauxxx's work suggests a deep critique of mainstream and other alternative pornographies that extends beyond a feminist gender-based (or gender-, race-, and class-based) analysis, and expresses a political commitment to doing its work very differently. Until very recently, most academic work about pornography or alt porn has not taken into account this project or anything like it, so I think it is important to study its values and how its content reflects (or does not reflect) them. NoFauxxx is "the largest and longest-running queer porn site in history" (Trouble, 2010). According to Trouble's personal website, she is one of the founders of the queer porn movement and may have actually coined the term "queer porn." It also describes many of NoFauxxx's 150 performers as alt porn stars as well as "mainstream porn stars" (Trouble, 2010). Two of Trouble's porn films, scenes from which appear on NoFauxxx as video content, have won Feminist Porn Awards: one for "Most Deliciously Diverse Cast" and one for "Most Tantalizing Trans Film." Though unrelated to porn content, I think it is worth noting that both films were also nominated by Adult Video News (AVN) for "Best Music Soundtrack" awards. Since

AVN is the leading magazine of the mainstream porn industry, this recognition suggests that the films' fan base is not limited to an underground niche market.

The following chapter consists of a content analysis of both case study subjects. The specific element of *Made in Secret* that I study is how the group produces its porn. My primary data for this comes from the content of the film and other information available in the DVD's "special features" section, and, where necessary, I supplement this with data that is publicly available online (such as the film's website, published interviews with the filmmakers, etc).

NoFauxxx is especially interesting because of the values it expresses regarding the content of its porn. I study the project's values, such as what is considered "good" or "desirable" in porn content, as well as the actual content of its pornography. My primary data for this comes from the NoFauxxx website, particularly the parts of its "mission" webpage that are relevant to the content of its porn and a selection of the video- and photograph-based porn content. Where necessary, I also draw on the personal profiles and personal websites of some of the actors featured in the porn in order to help contextualize the porn content.

## **Chapter 2: Analysis & Discussion**



This chapter consists of my analyses of the two case studies of alt porn experiments. The first section studies the porn production process of a semi-fictional anarcha-feminist porn collective as represented in the film *Made in Secret: The story of the East Van Porn Collective*. It explores the collective's motivations and values, as well as how they actually put these values into practice. The second section studies the porn content of an explicitly political, queer feminist alt porn website, NoFauxxx. I explore how the website's porn portrays healthy sex, inclusivity and egalitarianism, and the breaking of harmful stereotypes.

## **Case Study I: Porn Production Process**

The first alt porn experiment I address is portrayed in *Made in Secret*, a film about a Vancouver-based semi-fictional anarcha-feminist porn collective's porn-making process. It essentially began with a couple of people wanting to make a documentary about an anarcha-feminist porn collective. The filmmakers were critical of mainstream pornography and deeply embedded in DIY and activist communities where collective process was the norm, so they set out to document a collective-based method of creating porn. Since they knew of no one already engaging in such a project, they eventually became the collective they set out to document. What unfolded was a part-documentary, part-fictional account of what it might look like for a group of people to collectively make pornography by, for, and about one another according to feminist principles.

Since none of the people they recruited for the project were actors, and since all were well-versed in collective process, participants simply played themselves. As one participant, Professor University, describes, "We really were playing ourselves—or at

least heightened or comic-book character versions of ourselves.” The “script” was loosely structured depending on each participant’s personality, with some participants receiving clear scripts and others having only vague guidelines about how their “character” would act in specific situations. Most of the time, they were given vague guidelines to “do what you would normally do” in a given situation. Since none of them knew how to “act” out the sorts of situations that were intended to be portrayed fictionally, they created real porn films and watched them collectively in order to document their genuine feelings, behaviours, and reactions. In some cases, lines, scenes, and even entire characters were rewritten in order to better suit a particular participant’s personality. In many ways, then, the participants wound up actually becoming the collective that they set out to document fictionally. The degree to which the “documentary” is “real” or “fictional” is thus difficult—if not impossible—to determine, since even the participants themselves cannot decipher or agree upon which elements are or are not “real.”

Regardless of whether the film documents a “real” group or project, I find it particularly interesting because of the possibilities it presents—because of what it envisions. The film puts forth an anarchy-feminist ethical framework for the filmmakers’ ideal porn-making process, and then attempts to show what this could look like in practice. This film follows the collective through the production of their “ninth” porn film, *BikeSexual*, and explores their decision-making process as well as some of the conflicts the group encounters along the way. In particular, the film focuses on a conflict that arises when one member, Monster, proposes a new direction for the collective to take and another member, nerdgirl, has strong reservations about it. The film’s part-fictional nature can be seen as an asset because it does not require the filmmakers to rely on the

presence of—and limitations associated with—a real conflict. Instead, it gives them the needed space and flexibility to set up very difficult situations and then demonstrate how their collective process can creatively resolve them while still being fair to all involved. Even though this film is not wholly based on a “real” project, I think what it describes is very real in its possibilities. Imagining porn projects that defy industry norms is a small step toward creating a world where people are treated more fairly in all aspects of our lives, and where cultural production is held to a much higher ethical standard.

In the rest of this section, I explore the collective’s motivations and values, as well as how they put these values into practice. Sometimes I cite the characters being “interviewed” in the “documentary,” and sometimes I cite the actors reflecting on the film and on their characters in the DVD’s “special features” section. When referring to specific characters, I usually refer to them as a “character” or by their “porn name” in the film. The characters include: Muffy LaRue, Hugh Jorgen, nerdgirl, JD Superstar, Mr. Pants, Monster, and Professor University. When referring to the actors/filmmakers of the “documentary,” such as when citing their reflections from the DVD’s “special features,” I usually refer to them as actors, filmmakers, or by their actual names: Anna, Matt, Nadine, Katie, Aaron, Sarah, Todd, and Godfrey. Even more confusingly, I also often make reference to the participants in *BikeSexual*, the porn film made by the collective throughout the course of the documentary. In this case, I usually refer to them as “participants” or by using their porn names (above).

## Motivations & Values

There is a wide range of reasons why *Made in Secret*'s characters make their porn, and their motivations are mostly rooted in their values. The most prominent reason is the desire to actively participate in their culture. For Mr. Pants, "making sexy movies" is not especially important. What he values is "that we are engaging ourselves as a group, and participating in our culture in a way that I think is really meaningful and unique." Direct participation in cultural production is his priority.

Similarly, JD Superstar wants to produce alternative images of attractiveness and desirability in order to help people, such as herself, feel validated and sexy in a world where most bodies are relegated to invisibility. Even for members of subcultures and counter-cultures, such as queer and activist communities, where mainstream culture is actively rejected, "we want to see ourselves, we want to be reflected in the culture around us, on the big picture, on the billboards, [and] on the small little box-sets." She adds, "it's a hard thing to be invisible." For nerdgirl, it is also about producing queer-positive alternative images in particular: "I know when I see those images that are not the sort of straight and narrow, I feel really validated as a person, in my personhood and in my sexuality."

Professor University is tired of mainstream porn and seeks to foster an appreciation for diversity in porn genres, styles, and themes. He hopes to make the kind of porn he wants to watch, which he describes as "dark and plot-driven," because he has not yet been able to find an example of porn that turns him on. "I'm not sure that we're going to make the movie that turns me on," he reflects, "but I want to make the *kind* of movie that turns me on, and I want to live in a world where that kind of movie exists, so

that someday someone will make a movie—someone who’s not me—will make a movie that turns me on and I’ll be able to watch it. And be turned on.”

These critical and creative attitudes all constitute the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic characteristic of many activist communities and subcultures. An effective way to explain this ethic is by likening it to the principle of “direct action” that is central to anarchist activity.

According to Rob Sparrow, “Direct [a]ction aims to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than through the actions of others. [...] Direct [a]ction is not only a method of protest but also a way of ‘building the future now’” (as cited in Graeber, 2010: 202). Similarly, Harald Beyer-Arnesen defines direct action as “an action carried out on the behalf of nobody but ourselves, where the means are immediately also the ends. [...] A direct action successfully carried out brings about a direct rearrangement of existing conditions of life through the combined efforts of those directly affected” (as cited in Graeber, 2010: 207). Beyer-Arnesen also notes that “any direct action is to a certain degree an act of ‘propaganda by the deed,’ since they are meant to teach through example” (Graeber, 2010: 208). Groups engaging in direct action thus do not simply act for themselves but also set “an example of self-organization to [inspire] other communities” (Graeber, 2010: 208). It is easy to see how DIY values and the principle of direct action are entwined with one another and with anarchism’s prefigurative politics. Creating alternative pornographies is just one example of direct action taken to rectify perceived problems with pornography.

One of the collective’s founding principles—that the porn they make is intended to be seen only by the members of the collective—is closely related to other aspects of

the DIY ethic. This principle places the group's porn outside of the realm of commerce or the public eye and instead situates it within the bounds of an exclusive community. This exclusivity serves to free the collective from the constraints of projects designed for financial gain, since the final product does not need to adhere to corporate industry standards or limitations, and the films are developed according to the producers' tastes rather than the presumed tastes of a paying audience on whom the producer is financially dependent.

This exclusivity is also intended to create and preserve the trust necessary for the intimate sharing that takes place within the group. Consequently, this makes it difficult for the group to engage in the popular education necessary for the collective to have an influence beyond the confines of their small group. This is particularly interesting because a motivating factor for Monster is her desire for the East Van Porn Collective to inspire and influence other porn collectives, locally and elsewhere. This conflict between the porn's intended audience and some members' desire to inspire wider social change materializes as a central part of the film's plot.

Monster also describes a desire to document herself and her sexuality at a particular point in her life: "There's not that many other people I know who, when they're 80, will be able to look at a video of themselves having sex when they were all young and cute." Though the autobiographical value of such a project is important, this statement suggests that sex is somehow more aesthetically pleasing in youth than in old age—an implication that contradicts the valuation of diversity and the condemnation of invisibility articulated elsewhere in the film.

JD Superstar's motivations are rooted in her anarcha-feminist politics. She summarizes the collective's feminism in a way that weaves together the threads of anarchism and feminism outlined in Chapter 1. At one point in the DVD's "special features," JD Superstar is asked: "Most people would look at a collective that's focusing on porn, and a collective that's half-men, and say, 'How is this a feminist collective?'"

She confidently responds:

Well, that depends on what your definition of feminism is. We tend to look at feminism not just in terms of what gender you are or what you have in your pants, but how you carry yourself in the world, how you treat each other, levels of respect, and so the collective is very much a feminist collective. [...] We're all in this together, we're all sharing different ways of viewing sexuality, different ways of having sex. And we're also really into learning about how we all go through this, and we want to really show some of the conflicts and some of the harmonious ways men and women, women and women, and men and men all negotiate their sexuality. So to look at the numbers of men and women in our collective is really counter-productive, because you're missing the point. And one of the points of feminism, if you really understand feminism, is that it's not about women, it's about everybody. And it's about everybody having a lot more freedom, and a lot more voice, and a lot more input into who they are, and to break down those bonds that gender roles put us into. So, I mean, for me I think it's really wonderful working with this group of men, and [...] women, who all have sort of the same ideas, the same goals, and are all really feminist.

For JD Superstar, anarcha-feminism has as much to do with self-determination and meaningful participation as with sex or gender.

In my view, anarcha-feminism served to inform and shape some of the characters' participation in *BikeSexual* in specific ways. The characters were all played by uniquely attractive yet average-looking people with a range of average-sized and -shaped bodies and typical body-image issues and insecurities. JD Superstar reflects on how anarcha-feminism informed her critique of mainstream porn, and how it inspired her to challenge herself by stepping outside of her comfort zone in order to create challenging alternative porn content with a "greater good" in mind:

My biggest issue with being naked, it's not actually about the sex so much, it's more [...] about my body, because I was really insecure about how I looked, kinda just pudgy and [pale] and flabby and all that stuff, and so that was my big inhibitor. And then I thought about it and was like, "That's ridiculous, this is who I am, this is me, this is what I look like, this is what women look like," and part of what we're doing here is to stop this porno [...] body-type hegemony that exists, and I felt like I was really not stepping up to the plate if I wasn't able to do that myself. So I just sort of went for it, and then I sort of got used to the idea. And now that part is becoming less and less of a [big] deal and I feel really good about it, I feel like it's something that we do that I really like a lot.

When describing her character, Katie, the actress who plays JD Superstar, figures that JD Superstar "would probably want to be naked as a way of fighting the patriarchy," even, or maybe *especially*, when faced with her own insecurities.

The collective's porn explores the multi-facetedness of attraction and desire. It is intended to combat the invisibility of certain groups of people in the world of mainstream representation, to validate one another's sexiness, to give all participants more input into how they are represented, and more freedom and voice as they explore together their various sexualities. Their work is fueled by a commitment to DIY and direct action politics, and to anarcha-feminist values.

None of the actors here describe themselves as passive consumers of culture; instead, they see themselves as active and creative producers of sexual representations. A porn production process that complements this orientation to direct participation is one where all participants have a voice in the decision-making process, and where all can participate in the actual production of cultural products.

### **Collective Process**

The best way for a participant to ensure that the porn they are in is, in fact, living up to their values is for them to have significant input in the decisions being made about



it. The group's collective decision-making process, rooted in both feminist and anarchist politics, presents a real and radical challenge to mainstream approaches to porn production, and even to other self-described feminist porn producers. The core of the group's porn production process is its collective structure.

Throughout the documentary, interviews with characters describe how the collective process is fundamentally egalitarian and democratic rather than hierarchical or coercive. This is evident in the members' voluntary and direct participation, the group's consensus-based decision-making, the rotation of roles and responsibilities, and the valuation of safe space. All of these anarchy-feminist guidelines and more foreground the group's porn-making, and thus help maintain the trust that makes it possible for the group to continue operating as it does.

**Voluntary participation:** Participation in the collective and in any of the collective's projects is entirely voluntary. Members only participate if they are willing and able to. For example, during the filming of *BikeSexual*, nerdgirl had to work out of town for the duration of the filming and so was unable to devote her time to that particular film. Her needs were respected by the group, so she was able to temporarily withdraw from that film without any negative repercussions.

Also, members only participate to the extent that they feel comfortable. For example, one particular scene in *BikeSexual* was specifically designed to accommodate the fact that its two participants, Monster and JD Superstar, were not comfortable with actually kissing or having sex due to the fact that JD Superstar was in a relationship with Monster's close friend and housemate nerdgirl. They worried that too much intimacy between them could complicate their relationships outside of the film context. As a result

the scene was constructed to be sexy and intense while respecting the boundaries set by the participants.

This does not mean, however, that members do not push themselves to try new things or work on projects they are not entirely thrilled about. One example of this is related by Professor University upon sharing his feelings about *BikeSexual*, a film mostly conceptualized and led by JD Superstar. He remarked:

She definitely has a vision of the movie that she wants, and she's generating enthusiasm for getting it done and that's always the thing, because... I, for instance, am not really excited about the orgiastic, episodic romp. But I understand that it's the movie that really appeals to her and I want to help her and that's why I'm rolling around in the mud and... I don't know, I guess I know that when I have my vision of a sexy movie and it's all dark and plot-driven, that JD'll be there for me, and that feels good.

In this case, Professor University is not feeling coerced into doing something he is uncomfortable with. He is in fact demonstrating a commitment to be in solidarity with JD Superstar because he sees that there is more at stake in his participation than personal taste or preference.

Another feature of voluntary participation that I think is worthy of note is the fact that participation in all of the collective's porn films is unremunerated. The lack of financial incentive to participate means that they are participating out of a more authentic desire than if they were doing it for compensation. In social and economic contexts where many people are drawn to the sex industry primarily out of economic necessity, the non-issue of financial incentive for participation in projects like *BikeSexual* makes it more evident that participation is a voluntary decision.

**Direct participation:** All members of the collective participate directly in making the decisions that affect them. The cast in a given scene gets to choose their own crew,

usually the people they feel most comfortable with. The cast also gets to perform the first edits, so they can delete any material they do not like before the others see it. All participants in the project—whether appearing on screen or not—have an equal say in how the film is used, and no decision passes unless everyone affected by the decision is comfortable with it. This is rooted in the collective’s consensus-based decision-making process.

**Consensus:** All major decisions affecting the collective or a particular film are made by the collective as a whole, whenever possible. Professor University explains that decisions are made based on the consensus of everyone in the collective, not just those producing a particular project. Consensus refers to a decision-making process whereby everyone who is affected by a decision has a fundamental right to participate in shaping it. The goal of consensus is to look for solutions that work for every person who has a stake in the outcome. Majority-rule models do not tend to allow for this, and so the people who are often in the minority tend to feel excluded or disenfranchised. Mr. Pants describes the process this way:

What it means in practice is that we don’t vote, we have a lot of meetings, we rotate our roles for each project, so every six months or so we have a new project coordinator, we have a new meeting facilitator, [and] we have a new editor. Those people are empowered by the group to lead and facilitate in those roles, but all the decision-making that goes on still happens in the group. And it takes a little bit more time than a conventional top-down approach. It’s a lot more rewarding, and it’s more fun, and it’s certainly a lot more fair than any [other] process I’ve been a part of.

So even though there are people in positions of leadership at various stages throughout a given project, these people do not have additional weight or authority in determining the direction of the project or the collective. Even if someone were to try, it would not likely be successful. Hugh Jorgen reflects on this:

It's hard to control a group of people like this, who are at their best when they're sort of running wild. It kind of takes on a life of its own, the collective. You put together the elements to set them rolling, and they just... it's like owning a whale. You can't really control it even if you think it's yours.

The uncontrollable nature of collectives is thus a large part of what keeps them functioning *as* collectives.

Ultimately, the collective is aware that consensus-based decision-making processes are not popular outside of the radical community. Godfrey explains, "We have a really deep-seated cultural bias against [consensus], which makes it impossible for a lot of people to even imagine the benefits of this kind of process." Aaron adds, "A lot of people think that spending time on something means *wasting* time on something." Considering Western culture's emphasis on efficiency and expediency, "relationship and community" are rarely taken seriously enough in relation to this "goal-driven and profit-driven" culture (Godfrey).

According to Todd, the actor/filmmaker who played Professor University, "The experience of making [*Made in Secret*] is what actually brought the hope back to me that consensus really can work [...] so this project really gave me a lot more hope, and a lot more faith that this is a really good, viable way of doing things." Similarly, Aaron, the actor/filmmaker who played Mr. Pants, comments that many people have said, upon viewing *Made in Secret*, that "it restored their faith in consensus as a process." These testimonies—that being a part of and/or witnessing consensus-based process *when it works* can be powerful and inspiring—reveals the impact such prefigurative projects can have in inspiring hope in utopian goals.

**Rotation of roles:** Directly related to consensus-based decision-making is the regular rotation of roles, a feature that serves to balance the power dynamics and

workload responsibilities among all the collective members over time. For the East Van Porn Collective, these roles include the meeting facilitator, editor, and project coordinator, as mentioned, and the cast changes constantly as well. For example, in filming *BikeSexual*, JD Superstar was the project coordinator, Professor University was the meeting facilitator, and the cast included most of the collective at various points.

**Safe space:** Another important feature of the East Van Porn Collective's collective process is the value invested in creating and maintaining a safe space. For example, the collective's activities involve a number of bonding activities, including watching films together, discussing the films, making and eating meals together, and producing films together. All of these activities help to create an environment of friendship and trust. Similarly, the consensus process is related to building a safe space, because it is an example of the collective's commitment to not make decisions that could upset or alienate any of the members.

Another way of ensuring safe space is for those appearing on film to have control over what happens with that material. One rule, for example, is that the cast are the first ones to review the footage of their scenes and make their desired edits. Having this degree of control over how one is represented is fundamental to creating an environment where cast members feel more free to take risks and experiment without worrying about potential embarrassment.

Yet another way the safe space is enforced is by the collective making rules governing their own interpersonal behaviour, such as making a rule in the collective that they cannot say anything negative about anyone's bodies. Professor University explains how, in the collective's early days, they watched a lot of mainstream porn and would

critique the “plasticky, homogenized, almost cartoonish body-type that porn presents,” and this helped the group to develop their ideas about what they did and did not like about such porn. According to Professor University, they later reflected that:

After a while, that critique was no longer informing our analysis in any useful way. It became detrimental. When you do that, you’re creating an environment where the way that your boobs look and the face you make when you have an orgasm is a valid point of critique. [...] When you take that topic off the table as a valid point of criticism or conversation, it starts to change the environment and the cultural framework on a really profound level.

In creating this rule, then, collective members were able to further their commitment to creating a safe space for everyone involved.

Another rule the group created was that nobody could show the film to anyone outside of the collective. All films were made by and for collective members only. Some minor exceptions were made, such as if someone wanted to show their solo scene to their non-collective partner. Some characters saw this rule as a fundamental founding principle of the collective and crucial to maintaining the collective as a safe space, so when a character proposed a significant one-time modification to this rule it became a point of such contention for the group that they debated the purpose and future of the collective, its role in the world, and whether it was beginning to outgrow its original purpose. Ultimately the collective’s commitment to a consensus-based process allowed them to reach a resolution that everyone was happy with, and this without having to compromise their earlier agreement or their values, even though it took a 10-hour meeting to reach that point.

## Case Study II: Porn Content

The second alt porn experiment I address is NoFauxxx, an alt porn website that espouses feminist and anarchistic values. Its mission statement indicates sex-positivity and a strong feminist analysis suggesting a deep critique of mainstream and other alternative pornographies that extends beyond a feminist gender-based (or gender-, race-, and class-based) analysis, and expresses a political commitment to doing its work very differently. It prioritizes performer and viewer arousal, artistic quality, a DIY aesthetic, financial accessibility, safer sex and consent, and respectful content; boasts an all-inclusive casting attitude regarding gender, body size, race, and other considerations, referring to itself as a “community of varied identities” that aims to break normative stereotypes regarding typecast groups; provides a “female-friendly” perspective in terms of who can enjoy making and consuming porn; and demands respect for its trans and genderqueer participants.

NoFauxxx contains porn content in both photo and video form. The videos consist mostly of clips from NoFauxxx creator Courtney Trouble’s queer porn DVDs, as well as scenes from other films and independent submissions. The photo section includes photosets taken during the production of Trouble’s films or shot by Trouble in other contexts, as well as photosets created and submitted independently by the models themselves. The website also contains biographical information about some of the performers, links to similar projects and the personal websites of some NoFauxxx performers, and information about purchasing the DVDs, NoFauxxx t-shirts, and other merchandise.

In the rest of this section, I use semiotic and contextual analyses to study how the actual content of NoFauxxx's pornography fits with the project's stated values, and how it fits with a prefigurative porn politics. I will do so by drawing on examples from NoFauxxx's video and photo content to illustrate utopian-inspired approaches to constructing porn content. The themes I investigate include healthy sex, inclusivity and egalitarianism, and stereotyping.

To study porn as a mostly visual form of social communication, I draw on Leiss, Kline, and Jhally's (1997) interpretation of semiotic analysis. These authors discuss semiotics in terms of its application to the study of advertising, a media form that is well rooted in ideological communication and socialization. Due to this, and due to the fact that no feminist critiques of porn have provided a clear indication of their methodological approach to studying porn, I think the tools used by Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1997) are thus relevant to studying alt porn as a form of ideological communication—i.e. as utopian pedagogy.

Semiology, or the "science of signs" (De Saussure, 1966, as cited in Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 198), concentrates "on relationships among the parts of a message or communication system" (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 198). "Reading" mediated messages depends "on relating elements in the ad's internal structure to each other, as well as drawing in references from the external world," and "decoding" them requires a systematic method (such as semiology) that is sensitive to these nuances (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 198). "Semiology originates in a discussion of signs, or more specifically, of a 'system of signs'" (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 200). Anything that has a meaning, that communicates a message, can be a sign (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 200). For the



sake of this research paper, I study the signs within NoFauxxx's porn videos and photosets, in particular the relationships between the iconic signs representing people within a given video or photoset.

In order to find out how specific instances of porn take on meaning, we must look at the sign as part of a larger social context or system of meaning (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997: 200). Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1997: 200) explain:

A sign within a system of meaning may be separated into two components: "the signifier" and "the signified." The signifier is the material vehicle of meaning; the signified actually "is" the "meaning." The signifier is its "concrete" dimension; the signified is its "abstract" side. While we can separate the two for analytical purposes, in reality they are inseparable.

The "signified," too, has two dimensions: denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning is simply the "objective" or "superficial" description of the sign, what appears on the surface, while the connotative meaning is more complicated since it involves more subjective interpretation.

A major weakness in this method is its unreliability, in particular at the level of interpreting connotative meanings. Because deriving meaning from an image or set of images using a semiotic analysis is not entirely systematic and is thus subject to the interpreter's interpretation, this method alone cannot provide reliable results.

One way this can happen is that the same example of porn can be read differently based on the interpreter's ideological positioning. If they are looking for evidence of porn as exploitation or stereotyping, they can probably find it in queer alt porn. If they are looking for evidence of porn as liberating or challenging stereotypes, they can probably find that, too, in the same example.

To illustrate: one video on the website features three people. Two of them are white and one is a person of colour. The two white people are having sex on a mattress in the middle of the room and serve as the focal point of the first half of the scene, while the person of colour is masturbating on a chair off to the side and is only the focus of the film at occasional, brief intervals. An audience or analyst looking for evidence of racist exploitation could read this video as marginalizing people of colour by keeping them in the background or periphery of the action as passive observers rather than active participants, thus really only including them as tokens of ethnic diversity or possibly even to serve as reinforcement of their marginalization. An audience or analyst looking for material that challenges such racist portrayals, on the other hand, might instead read this scene as putting the person of colour in power by positioning her as the owner of the gaze, rather than its object, thus reversing the typical relationship of people of colour as colonized objects of inspection by white people. The meaning of this element of the scene thus does not exist outside of interpretation, and interpretation is largely shaped and informed by other elements in this same video, the viewing context, the viewer's positioning, and prior understandings of the particular porn example's production context and intent. There is simply no way to absolutely unproblematically represent any person, group, or interaction; and as interpreters, all we can do is be clear about the assumptions underpinning our interpretations and try to be as true as we can to the intended meaning—what Stuart Hall calls the “preferred meaning” (1997: 228)—of such representations.

In addition, Cindy Patton (1991) rejects the idea that porn can be read as a single genre, because there are myriad types of porn, not all of which are based on the dominant

set of codes of sexual representation, though many may be derived from it. Patton's term "pornographic vernacular" refers to the notion that "[s]exual languages are very much tied to particular communities, and each community has its own very rich and special way of speaking [i.e. its own local vernacular]: a sexual artifact that makes sense in one community often looks very strange or offensive or stereotypical when taken outside that context" (Patton, 1991: 53). I interpret this vernacular to mean visual language as well as linguistic language. "Sexual vernacular may be more open to misreading than other vernaculars because they rely on 'found' symbols and syntax" (Patton, 1991: 47). Mainstream audiences may read queer porn through dominant-culture stereotypes or meanings because that is their language, that is how they understand the language of sexual representation. "When someone has problems with one of these [porn] tapes, it's useful to ask whether they understand the way in which the language operates for the community that designed it and how it is meaningful for that community" (Patton, 1991: 53).

As such, the proper study of alternative pornography requires consideration of not only the porn's content, but also—and perhaps more importantly—its specific social context and thus its local vernacular. The literature reviewed in Chapter 1 discusses some feminist perspectives on pornography in recent decades, which helps us to understand the context from which alt porn projects such as NoFauxxx have emerged. More important is the specific subcultural context and oppositional positioning of NoFauxxx's porn, which is also significant to understanding its porn's meaning. NoFauxxx's mission statement provides the most direct insight into the intent behind its porn, and further insight can be gleaned from the published personal statements of some of its models.

Pornography only makes sense if the audience or analyst is aware of the outside referent systems that give the video(s) and/or image(s) meaning. This means being familiar with the sets of cultural meanings and values typically associated with porn as a genre which create a framework for understanding porn as both potentially arousing and potentially exploitative or degrading. In the case of queer alt porn in particular, this also means being familiar with the specific context in which the porn exists, and being familiar with the referent systems and vernacular particular to that context, in order to have a framework for understanding this porn as challenging or resisting mainstream porn, even when portraying the same or similar signifiers in the same or similar scenarios. It means understanding that the way a sign like a dildo, a queer or racialized or disabled body, or a knife carries meaning in queer alt porn can be very different from the way it carries meaning in more conventional porn.

As such, my semiotic analysis incorporates references to NoFauxxx's specific situated context in order to be clear about my interpretations of its porn content. This is an attempt to control for arbitrary variability in interpretations. Making clear the context of this porn—that is, the communities from which it arises and the intent behind its production—serves to position my own reading of it within a realistic framework closely resembling that within which the porn was probably *meant* to be interpreted in the first place.

Some prominent themes from the critique in Chapter 1 match many of the values highlighted in NoFauxxx's mission statement, so this analysis focuses on how NoFauxxx's porn content addresses these concerns. The (somewhat overlapping) themes

include healthy sex, inclusivity and egalitarianism, and breaking normative stereotypes regarding typecast groups.

## Healthy Sex

One of Dworkin's primary concerns with pornography is its alleged physical and psychological harm to women. NoFauxxx's mission statement describes a commitment to practicing and representing safer sex and consent, thus addressing some of these concerns. It reads:

We use condoms, latex gloves, and other safer sex supplies for the majority of our work, in order to eroticize and normalise the use of safer sex supplies in our true sex lives. We believe all performers in the adult industry have the right to use safer sex supplies. In addition, we strongly believe in mutual consent between models, as well as producers and directors. Most of the shoots on the site are directed by the models themselves, and some are even self-shot.

For NoFauxxx, a healthy sexuality is thus multi-dimensional. For Carlomusto and Bordowitz, "safer" sex generally refers to "a set of individual decisions one makes about one's sexual life in view of one's health concerns. And since *pleasure*—the ultimate goal—also contributes to one's well-being, the message has to make clear that *any* sexual act can be made safer: that we can safely get laid, get it on, get off and do it!" (1989: 39; emphasis in original). The term "safer" is used in place of "safe" to distinguish a "liveable" degree of safety from absolute safety, where the principle of "livability" determines the degree of safety that we can reasonably expect people to adhere to (Speck, 1993: 50).

"Safer" is also simply more accurate because it reflects the fact that most "safe sex" practices only *reduce* risk of infection anyway, rather than completely eliminating it.

Some examples of healthy sex include using tools such as condoms, dental dams, and

surgical gloves in sexual interactions and using proper sterilization and safety practices when engaging in sexual activities involving broken skin (such as knife play or body modification) or restricted breathing (such as rope bondage or strangulation-play); however, safety from infection or suffocation is not the only determinant of healthy sex.

Establishing clear consent and boundaries with one's partners before and during all sexual activity, not only kinky activities, is also essential to ensuring healthy sexual experiences. NoFauxxx's mission statement establishes this as one of the fundamental criteria that porn has to meet. The mission statement suggests that these safer sex practices are signified within the porn in order to "eroticize and normalize" their use in people's real lives.

**Safer sex supplies:** According to Patton (1991), one way to signify safer sex practices is to make the condom, gloves, or dental dam visible in the video or photo. Many of NoFauxxx's videos and photos signify safer sex in this way. They usually show the condom on a penis or dildo for fellatio or vaginal or anal penetration, black nitrile gloves on hands for manual-genital or -anal stimulation or penetration, and dental dams or plastic wrap held against genitalia during cunnilingus. The sheer ubiquity of safer sex portrayals and the smoothness and ease with which the actors employ safe sex practices suggest that this is simply *what people do*. It serves a normalizing function, making safer sex supplies seem like natural parts of good sex.

Often, the videos and photos take this a step further by showing the condoms or dental dams being correctly applied, thus serving an additional educational function—after all, what good is a dental dam or condom to someone who does not know how to use it? Since NoFauxxx ranks its priority to arouse above its priority to represent safer

sex, it makes a commitment to not let the porn's educational function overshadow or interrupt its sexiness.

Patton (1991) reflects on the challenges and risks involved when skirting the fine line between titillation and education in pedagogical porn. One way to navigate this difficult terrain is by eroticizing the use of safer sex supplies in the porn. Often this is done by incorporating safer sex supplies into the activity in ways that are intentionally playful or arousing in themselves. For example, Patton describes a safer sex short porn film where “[t]he men snap the condoms in mock dick-torture, suggesting not only that condoms are *ordinary*, but also that they are an improvement in the game” (1991: 50; emphasis in original). It is difficult to find such examples in NoFauxxx's porn, though the use of black nitrile gloves is eroticized in some scenes. It is a recurring pattern in the photosets to have one shot focused solely on the glove about to be put on or in the process of being put on. This builds suspense and excitement by signifying that there is more to come, because the glove is generally worn in anticipation of some form of manual stimulation. In addition, the black colour of most of the nitrile gloves in these scenes is meaningful because black is usually associated with kink and BDSM, while the blue and white versions of the same glove carry more medical connotations. Finally, in a NoFauxxx scene featuring Akira and Chocolate Chip, the latter appears to put on the gloves to enhance the smacking sound made when spanking Akira. Incorporating these gloves thus lends an additional kinky edge to many scenes.

In addition, Patton (1991: 35) notes that there are many often-overlooked forms of sexual activity that are “already always safe” such as “jerking off, licking, tit play, verbal scenes, and so forth, which [before AIDS and safe sex discourse] once constituted ends in

themselves” in gay sexual practices. The “heterosexualization” of gay sex by safe sex discourse has brought us to a point where all the already safe activities have been reconstituted “as ‘foreplay’ to an ultimate ‘intercourse’” (Patton, 1991: 35).

One example of this is a NoFauxxx scene featuring Maxine Holloway and Courtney Trouble, two BBW (big beautiful women) performers who frolic around on a bed licking food off of one another’s bodies, making out, and playing with balloons. Though condom-assisted intercourse does take place, it is neither the focus of the scene nor its ultimate “payoff.” NoFauxxx also features several solo masturbation videos and photosets, such as one where Sophia St. James becomes aroused by a quarterly trans magazine and masturbates in her living room, and one where Dia Zerva masturbates in the shower. Broadening what constitutes sex to include “always already safe” and “already erotic” activities is thus a critical part of promoting and eroticizing safer sex practices.

**Consent:** Establishing active and enthusiastic consent from one’s partner(s) is another important part of healthy sex. According to Millar (2008: 30), active consent demands enthusiastic participation—that is, the “presence of yes” rather than the “absence of no.” Millar advocates for what he calls a “performance model of sex,” where sex is understood as a performance, and partnered sex as a collaboration, rather than the existing “commodity model” where sex is thought of as something to be bought, sold, given, saved, or taken. A performance model involves the active negotiation of activities and boundaries before as well as during sex. “The negotiation is the creative process of building something from a set of available elements. [...] This process involves communication of likes and dislikes and preferences, not a series of proposals that meet



with acceptance or rejection” (Millar, 2008: 38-39). Bussel (2008: 44) argues that consent should be about more than a simple “yes” or “no.” It is not “concerned just with whether your partner wants to have sex. But what kind of sex, and why.” This model recognizes that “[t]here is a lot more that goes on during sex than simply saying yes or no, and in the silences, unspoken doubts, fears, mistrust, and confusion can arise” (Bussel, 2008: 46). Similarly, Corinna (2008) argues that to achieve true consent we have to get “past the no *and* the yes” (185) in order to foreground active desire “and the full expression of that desire” (191). Real, enthusiastic consent thus helps to establish trust and is an important part of creating safer, healthier sexual relationships and interactions.

Similar to the promotion of safer sex supplies described above, consent can also be included in porn in ways that normalize, educate about, and eroticize healthy sex. One way NoFauxxx videos signify such consent is to include clips from pre-sex negotiations in the film, or to interview the participants about how they establish consent, what they like, etc. Another way is by preserving the bits of negotiation and checking-in that take place between performers during the sex itself, rather than editing them out or muffling them with the soundtrack. Still another way of showing active consent is when the “bottom” or submissive partner is directing how sexual partners should touch her. The ease with which the participants incorporate such consent serves to normalize it as a healthy and natural part of sex, and sometimes the specific approaches themselves eroticize the consent, the consent-seeking process, or the checking-in. Bussel notes, however, that consent “shouldn’t necessarily have to be sold as ‘sexy’ to count as something vital and important” (2008: 48). Nevertheless, the broad social and historical context in which much sex happens is one where consent is not necessarily foregrounded

and is a very difficult issue for many people to discuss. Eroticizing consent is just one of many ways to begin easing it into normal sexual interactions.

NoFauxxx's Puck Goodfellow comments on this in his profile page for QueerPorn.tv: "I always talk to the person I am performing with before a scene and find out what they want and what their boundaries are [...] and that turns me on A LOT" (Goodfellow, no date; emphasis in original). The approaches modeled in NoFauxxx's porn serve as blueprints for audience members to appropriate and apply when trying to incorporate more active consent in their own sexual interactions.

One example of a NoFauxxx film that incorporates a few different snippets of negotiation and checking-in features Drew Deveau and Sealu Sideshow. The video begins with the two performers walking into the room in mid-conversation. Sealu is telling Drew what she likes: "I like fucking, so you're more than welcome to fuck me. I love being fucked with hands, and... I like a lot of ear-biting, and biting, and spanking, and all sorts of things." Before she is even finished speaking, Drew begins kissing her neck and being intimate, as though to signify that the negotiation itself is part of the foreplay rather than merely a technical process. Throughout the course of their interaction, they continue to check-in with each other by asking questions such as what type of lubricant the other prefers ("Water or silicone?") and "Do you want another finger?" They also give each other positive and constructive feedback, like "I like lots of lube," "That feels really good," and "I want to hear you moan really loud."

Another NoFauxxx scene, featuring Puck Goodfellow, Jolene Parton, and Jae, also depicts ways of establishing consent and checking-in. The scene begins with Jolene stroking Puck's chest and neck with the tip of a knife, and Puck providing active consent

by directing her where to stroke him with the knife. Then when Puck is penetrating Jolene, he periodically asks questions such as, “Want me to go slow?” and “Do you like that?” to check-in with her. Before changing positions, he asks, “Can I bend you over from behind?” Later when Jolene is stimulating Puck, he provides feedback on how he likes to be touched in the form of comments such as, “Yeah, just play with the head.” I refer mostly to spoken feedback rather than non-verbal communication because it is the clearest, most direct way to communicate one’s desires and comfort levels. There are other approaches, too, of course. “Some people get off on having one person take charge and set the tone, pace, and position for sex. That’s fine, *as long as this is spelled out at some point in advance and isn’t simply assumed*” (Bussel, 2008: 44; emphasis in original). Regardless of one’s preferences about the nature of the communication and when or how it takes place, the point of active consent is that these conversations *need to happen*.

A key part of many anti-porn critiques has to do with perceived violence in sexual interactions. As Rubin (1984) points out, these critics often take BDSM<sup>10</sup> porn scenes out of their original context and claim them to represent violence against women. Consider, however, this extended statement on consent from within the BDSM community:

Mainstream culture could, however, benefit greatly from considering some of the principles that BDSM communities practice routinely. Kink, in many ways, may be the most responsible form of sex because you *have* to talk about it. You have to articulate exactly what you do and do not want to happen before anything starts happening. Consensually playing with power and control, for many people (survivors included), is a safe way to confront the twisted, violent, inequality-ridden society that we live in, and to muddle through the ways our lives and experiences intersect with that. Kink, as well as the larger values of a sex-positive culture, rejects the models that we’re given for sex that teach us that it’s something based on uncontrollable impulses, something that happens organically

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<sup>10</sup> The acronym BDSM refers to kink practices involving bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and/or masochism (Riggs, 2008: 112).

in a realm beyond words. These are the same models that result in safer-sex negotiations and practices being seen as an interruption of the sexual experience, and the same models that contribute to a culture that accepts silence as consent. (Riggs, 2008: 113; emphasis in original)

NoFauxxx's incorporation of BDSM negotiation practices in its videos thus provides useful templates for viewers to model ethical approaches to transgressive sexual activities in their own lives. However, must consent and negotiation be signified before and during every scene just to show that the activities portrayed therein are ethical? Is this even possible? In an interview for the weblog Fleshbot, NoFauxxx's Syd Blakovich reflects on the visibility of consent in kinky porn:

On[-]camera rough sex is interesting, because a lot of the negotiation and boundary talk is done beforehand, in light of creating a smooth visual performance. However, the actions themselves are more disjointed because of the stop and go and cuts that are needed for camera and editing. In between these edits is when performers check in about how things are going, but you miss this when you're watching the final product. Off[-]camera rough sex is more of a mixture of aggression and compassion for me, because you get those checking[-]in moments to see how your partner is doing, if they are enjoying themselves. I think rough sex can be really fucking sweet and caring, because of the attention paid and awareness that is shared. There are some elements to this in on[-]camera [sex], but they are generally not included in the videos, which I think is a little bit of a disservice. (Alptraum, 2010)

The issue of visibility is significant to most of this section's analysis, and I reflect on this further in the conclusion of this paper.

### **Inclusive & Egalitarian**

NoFauxxx's philosophy about inclusive and egalitarian porn content is multi-layered. In its mission statement it claims to have an "all-inclusive casting attitude," a "female-friendly perspective," and a "trans-friendly" approach. I explore each of these overlapping values as they manifest themselves in NoFauxxx's porn content.

**All-inclusive:** NoFauxxx's position on inclusive casting is explained in its

mission statement:

We draw from many sources to create a community of varied identities. We do not take gender, size, race, or any other "consideration" into consideration when choosing our models. We do not have quotas or any ideals about what a porn star should look like.

This statement explains that NoFauxxx does not hold its models to homogenized or unrealistic standards of beauty, and that it recognizes the beauty and sexuality of all kinds of bodies. Further down the page, there is a list of things viewers are likely to encounter in NoFauxxx's porn content that paints a broader picture of what is meant by inclusivity:

Soft core, pin up girls, black and white erotica, sensual shots. Hard core, masturbation, role-playing, kink, and fetish. Straight, lesbian, gay, queer, and bisexual couples and groups. Girls, Boys, Transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, or gender-bending models. Fat, thin, chubby, curvy, zaftig, short, tall, and athletic models. Models of all races, taken out of the stereotypical context models of color are usually assigned in the sex industry. Disabled and non-disabled folks. BDSM, bondage, SM, shown as a positive thing as opposed to scary, dangerous, or perverted. (And also maybe some really dark creepy stuff too...) Punks, goths, emo kids, hipsters, hippies, and other "alternative" models. We love tats and piercings here, but not all of our models have them and not all of our models adhere to any subculture.

The website is inclusive in terms of both the various bodies it includes as well as the types of activities it portrays and how it portrays them. This inclusion serves to validate the identities, desires, and desirability of people who do not fit mainstream gender identities, do not conform to mainstream expectations of desire, and who do not fit mainstream definitions of beauty or desirability.

An example of this that I find particularly endearing is a scene between Papi and Wil, where Wil is shown using an asthma inhaler after a particularly active scene as he prepares for the next. The choice to preserve this moment in the scene rather than edit it

out illustrates the film's embracing of Wil as a whole person with a real human body—that is, with all of his humanity and vulnerability, rather than in spite of them.

**Female-friendly:** NoFauxxx also boasts a “female-friendly” attitude. In the mission statement this is explained in the following way:

The site is run by a woman, and most of our guest photographers are also female. We believe feminists can make pornography, perform in pornography, view pornography, and enjoy pornography as artists, workers, participants, and consumers.

These ideas emulate the sex-radical politics described in Chapter 1. Privileging women's desires and experiences in the production and consumption of this porn functions to validate them in an industry where porn is usually made by and for heterosexual men.

NoFauxxx's porn is not made solely for women, but acknowledges that women, men, and people of other genders have desires and experiences that do not fit neatly into normative “boxes” or categories.

One way this is signified is by showing people of all genders (but especially women) playing a wide variety of different genders and gender roles in different scenes, from very feminine through very masculine, and participating in and enjoying a wide range of activities including gentle and sensual, playful and kinky, rough and aggressive, as tops, bottoms, and switches, and more. Signifying women's pleasure can take on a variety of forms, such as moans, groans, and shrieks, full-body orgasmic shudders, and female ejaculation. In one fanciful scene entitled *The Blakovich Spot*, the central character Madison's pleasure is signified by animated fireworks appearing on the screen at the moment of climax.

**Trans-positive:** NoFauxxx's approach to trans people and their respective concerns and daily struggles is one of respect and demanding respect from others:

We believe that, for many people, genitals have nothing to do with gender or gender expression. We do have many trans and genderqueer models, and we ask that you respect them by referring to them by their preferred pronouns (“he,” “she,” or “ze” are the most common, and it will be specified in the model’s bio) if you’re blessed with the chance to interact with them on our message boards or through other means. If there are ANY reports of abuse or disrespect to ANY model for ANY reason, action will be taken to remove you from the message boards, and if necessary, the site. If you need more information about gender issues and language use, please check out [this link](#) or [this link](#).

Though this statement refers to NoFauxxx’s approach to the conditions of production of its porn rather than its content, it does suggest an analysis and respect that should be evident in its porn’s content.

I have had difficulty operationalizing the concept of “respect” in a queer porn context. How do you signify respect? Most feminist critiques of porn focus on signifiers of abuse or exploitation, but finding signifiers of respect and consent is much more difficult. It is difficult to signify something as abstract as respect without directly juxtaposing it with its opposite. Can respect be actively signified? Is it defined by a *lack* of signified *disrespect*? The best way to address this is by referring to Stuart Hall’s work on stereotypes in the following section.

### **Breaking Stereotypes**

Deeply entwined with the valuation of inclusiveness, egalitarianism, and diversity is NoFauxxx’s stated commitment to “breaking stereotypes”:

Many of the visual themes and sub-contexts within our photo sets and videos represent a break from the “norm,” allowing type-cast individuals to redefine their roles in the adult industry as well as in life.

This part of NoFauxxx's mission statement is an indirect reference to the sexist and racist stereotypes prevalent in mainstream porn and targeted in many arguments against pornography, as described in Chapter 1.

Hall explains that stereotypes “work” by reducing individuals or groups to a few essential characteristics and making those seem natural (1997: 249). They construct “otherness” and are used to justify the exclusion of some people or groups from some aspects of social life. According to Hall, “stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power” and so stereotypes are “usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group” (1997: 258). This suggests that in an egalitarian world stereotypes would cease to exist. A prefigurative porn project, then, should aim to create media that avoids and challenges stereotypes as though this egalitarian world were already here.

Hall suggests that one way to counter or avoid using stereotypes is to emphasize our common humanity rather than our differences (1997: 249). In NoFauxxx's porn, people who in mainstream media might be ascribed different standing based on arbitrary characteristics are instead treated equally. Trans, genderqueer, and cis-gendered<sup>11</sup> people; white people and people of colour; able-bodied and disabled people; all are treated with equal value regardless of their physical difference.

Another example relates to how some anti-porn critics tend to use penetration as a criterion to determine the dominant and submissive parties in a sexual interaction. The penetrator is understood as dominant while the person being penetrated is seen as submissive. This analysis is simplistic and avoids delving into the complexities of desire

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<sup>11</sup> The term “cis-gendered” refers to people who generally identify with the gender they were assigned at birth; this term is contrasted with “transgendered,” which refers to people who identify with a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth.



and power-play. It is also somewhat irrelevant to queer porn, since just about everyone penetrates and is penetrated at various points in a given scene! Or perhaps it *is* relevant in the sense that it signifies equality in ways that mainstream heterosexual porn typically does not.

Trans and genderqueer people feature in most of NoFauxxx's videos and none are treated with any less respect than the cisgendered people in the scenes. In cases where "inequality" is evident, it is never based on gender and is usually in the context of consensual power-play. Analyzed within the context of the entire website's porn content, there are no overarching patterns of any specific gender being targeted for abuse that would suggest a more systematic abuse or exploitation of any group.

These same observations apply to the treatment of people of colour, people of various body sizes, and other groups marked by their "difference." For example, in mainstream porn and other media black people are often portrayed as "oversexed," regardless of their gender (Hall, 1997: 262), and in Chapter 1 Collins describes black people as being equated with animals and subservient to white people. NoFauxxx's portrayals of black people provide a wide range of representations, and there are no overarching patterns of exploitation like those described.

Another strategy recommended by Hall for challenging stereotypes is to simply replace negative images with positive ones (1997: 272). That is, to accept and celebrate difference rather than demonizing it. Again, it is more difficult to signify respect and celebration than disrespect and demonization. Broadly speaking, NoFauxxx's models of colour and of size always appear very confident in their bodies, embracing themselves and each other without inhibition. In kinky scenes, people of colour or of size are never

referred to with language that draws attention to their difference. Trans bodies are celebrated as beautiful rather than treated as “freakish” or like spectacles.

Perhaps the most important contribution of projects like NoFauxxx is simply giving positive visibility and affirmation to marginalized and largely invisible groups and sexual practices. In their NoFauxxx profile page, Jiz Lee notes that “sexual freedoms and human rights” can be attained through celebrating and normalizing queer sex, such as “alternative” bodies and behaviors (Lee, no date).

## **Implications & Conclusions**

This paper reviewed various feminist approaches to pornography, outlining some of the stances that are critical of pornography as well as those that reconcile pornography and feminism. Following that, I outlined a theoretical framework that combined some elements of feminism with anarchist politics. I used shared values between feminism and anarchism to operationalize my research question in terms of what is meant by a “better” world, and drew on anarchism to outline some methodological tools for bringing about this better world.

Arguing that sexual relationships and sex-related projects guided by a particular ethical orientation could prefigure the sex of a better world, I analyzed two case studies of explicitly political queer alt porn projects in order to explore if, how, and to what extent these experiments embody, whether in porn content or production practices, a utopian pedagogical model of social change by putting into practice a set of visions of how ethical sexual representation could work.

Both of these projects are rooted in DIY, feminist, queer, and activist communities, and are motivated by a strong desire to participate and be reflected in the world around them. The members of the East Van Porn Collective model a way for the porn production process to be organized collectively in order to minimize structural inequality and power imbalances in the production process. NoFauxxx’s porn models the healthy sexual interactions and representations of a better world, where everyone is valued and their boundaries and desires are respected and taken seriously.

Some feminists do not believe that pornography could ever be a positive feminist project. The participation of marginalized people in a media genre that has long been touted as oppressive may thus seem to them to be counter-intuitive or even counter-

revolutionary. However, the bulk of this paper demonstrates otherwise. NoFauxxx model

Syd Blakovich (2009) reflects:

Giving an authentic voice to the creation of media is beyond empowering, especially when it's by groups of people who are marginalized, spoken for and continually silenced. [...] Homogenized media is a real disservice to the breadth and complexity [of] our culture and society. When you have a monopolized form of representations being produced by a very small segment of the society, it's detrimental to not only who we are but [also] who we can become.

Thus what may appear on the surface as collusion in one's own oppression can actually be understood as active resistance to this oppression, as the reclaiming of media and representations in order to rearticulate and redefine how we are represented. Framing these political alt porn projects as instances of utopian pedagogy—as necessary parts of the revolutionary transfer culture that serves as the bridge to get from “here” to the better world we want—allows us to understand them as activist projects prefiguring a better world free from domination, albeit from within (and in spite of the constraints imposed by) the existing inegalitarian system.

Both of these projects articulate critiques of the status quo and posit a set of alternative values and practices rooted in an ethical framework of anti-oppression. Consistent with prefigurative politics, the East Van Porn Collective and NoFauxxx are practical experiments intended to practice new, preferred ways of making porn; replace existing porn institutions and practices that are harmful; and inspire and model similar projects, while simultaneously creating concrete change right now and ensuring that their activities are always guided by the values of the better world they want.

Of course, neither of these projects is perfect. A criticism that can be applied to both projects is that the communities from which they originate are only small segments of the larger world they seek to inspire and change. In the case of the East Van Porn

Collective, the porn they made was intended to be seen only by the members of the collective, thus limiting its educational possibilities. The “documentary” about their porn-making process, too, was only intended for their immediate friends and members of their respective communities; however, it turned out to be a much more public document, even being screened at and receiving acclaim from more mainstream international film festivals. In the “special features” section, the actors/filmmakers discuss how one of the documentary’s filmmakers made a point of being the collective’s liaison with “the rest of the world,” providing feedback intended to help make the film more accessible to a general audience. Even so, much of the humour, language, values, and aesthetic of the film are culturally specific to DIY, activist, and feminist communities, and therefore make this film somewhat less accessible to those mainstream audiences who do manage to come across the film.

NoFauxxx is much more explicitly situated in a subcultural context, with roots in the somewhat interrelated and overlapping punk, goth, BDSM, emo, anarchist, hippy, and other subcultures in addition to the activist, feminist, queer, and DIY communities already mentioned. The problem that arises, again, is one of access. Not only is it more difficult for mainstream audiences to simply find this porn, but once they do find it there is a risk of the content not being culturally relevant or relatable to their own lives. More importantly, they may be unable to interpret queer porn’s preferred meanings, since the “pornographic vernacular” they know and understand is largely heteronormative. Mainstream audiences may thus read queer porn through dominant-culture stereotypes or meanings because its symbols and syntax also have (albeit different) meaning in heteronormative porn. In such cases, the alt porn’s pedagogical potential may be lost

altogether. It is probably not possible to transcend this vernacular barrier within queer alt porn, but the resulting gap can be addressed by inspiring similarly ethical work to be produced in other communities and with the appropriate sexual vernaculars for those groups. NoFauxxx already has its metaphorical foot in the door in this regard, since its porn has begun to feature well known alt porn stars and it has received mainstream industry recognition and visibility through its nominations for AVN awards.

Both projects risk “preaching to the converted,” for lack of a better term, but that is not necessarily a problem. If numerous similar projects begin to form in other communities and even network with one another, the pedagogical potential increases exponentially because each new project is full of new possibilities.

Just a few years ago NoFauxxx was Courtney Trouble’s only porn project and its content was much more limited than it is currently. Today she has produced multiple DVDs, she has featured in even more, and she co-owns at least one other queer porn website. Many other queer alt porn projects have been burgeoning around the world that are not directly connected to her. What was once a very isolated existence for queer porn is now practically becoming a movement in itself.

In the case of the East Van Porn Collective, many people were inspired by *Made in Secret*. According to a Straight.com article about the film:

In Toronto, audience members sent clipboards around the theatre to sign up for make-your-own porn. In Philadelphia, the collective found a community hungry for an alternative to “did someone call the plumber?” ennui. In Pittsburg, a filmmaker from the mainstream porn industry was excited about the alternative images that, JD Superstar remarked, show up only fleetingly in the film. The filmmaker plans to work on changing the way sex is portrayed in some of her company's films. (Woolley, 2005)

Another example of this is a group that was inspired to start a small independent porn film festival, entitled PORN-OFF, modeled after a similar (fictional) film festival discussed in *Made in Secret*.

Other weaknesses in *Made in Secret* include the fact that the actors/filmmakers are a fairly homogeneous group: all are young, white friends rooted in the same communities and subcultures and who share similar politics and values. This film demonstrates how a consensus-based decision-making process can work on a small scale and in a group of very similar people, but it does not provide much insight on how to apply a similar process or ethic to more large-scale situations and to more diverse groups of people who do not necessarily share the same values or experiences.

There is an unfair burden placed on a film or project when it is the only one of its kind, rather than part of a series or a larger collection, and is somehow expected to embody solutions to all conceivable problems it could come across. In this case, *Made in Secret* is only the first of three films intended to explore collective decision-making on a variety of scales and in different contexts. The second film in the series, tentatively entitled *Curve of the Earth*, will focus on a larger-scale process, and the third is intended to address egalitarian decision-making on a global scale.

NoFauxxxx also encounters a problem regarding the role and importance of signification in its porn. Earlier, I discussed the issue of visible consent and negotiation being signified before and during BDSM scenes in order to show that the activities portrayed therein are ethical. The issue of the necessity of signification is both important and tricky.



Many of the values NoFauxxx expresses can be signified by the presence of visible or audible respect, mutuality, reciprocity, and other abstract ideas that are largely difficult to signify unless directly juxtaposed with their opposites. Similarly, these values can also be signified by activities that could be interpreted, out of context, as disrespect, selfishness, abuse, or violence. For example, to members of the BDSM community consent and negotiation are presumed, but to “outsiders” their signification is necessary to the reading of preferred meanings—and even then they might not be enough. There is no one-size-fits-all type of ethical porn, nor should there be. The context thus has a significant bearing on interpretation, and on the degree to which signification of negotiation and consent is necessary.

NoFauxxx’s pedagogical potential is thus limited because the values it embraces are often not clearly or meaningfully signifiable, especially if the intent is to reach audiences outside of the porn’s community of origin. This suggests that the usefulness and necessity of the signification of consent and other values in a project like NoFauxxx are unclear. Perhaps the most significant pedagogical element is the stated intent itself, such as a project’s stated values or mission statement.

After all, prefigurative practice is about identifying our values and experimenting with ways to live them. These projects will be imperfect—they may even be deeply flawed—but the intent and the ethics are what matter most.

The pedagogical elements of these projects thus work in two ways. The first is by trying to change how porn is made and what porn looks like, thus inspiring new porn projects that reflect similar values, as noted above. However, simply creating more porn is not the only way to solve the problems in porn.

The second way these projects are pedagogical is by having effects on the wider world outside of porn. It is entirely possible that the pedagogical nature of these projects is primarily their ability to spark conversations, to get people thinking critically about and discussing how their lives are organized and how much input they really have in the decisions that affect them. Addressing issues of inequality in the realm of porn is necessary, but it is no more necessary than addressing it in all the realms of domination in our lives.

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