

Not Your Father's Playboy, Not Your Mother's Feminist Movement

Contemporary Feminism in a Porn Culture

*A talk delivered by **Rebecca Whisnant** at the conference "Pornography and Pop Culture: Re-framing Theory, Re-thinking Activism" (Boston MA, March 24, 2007)*

I've been asked to speak this morning about the state of contemporary feminism, particularly in relationship to pornography and the porn culture that surrounds us. What's meant by a porn culture will be explored in a number of ways over this weekend. But if you are here, it's presumably because you already believe that, whatever a porn culture is, it's not what feminists, or women, or anybody with a lick of sense ever meant by "sexual liberation."

Unfortunately, we live in a cultural and political climate that makes it very difficult even to hold onto our sense that there is a problem with the porn culture, let alone to articulate just exactly what that problem is. In this climate, just being in this big room together—hundreds of us, many having travelled long distances to be here because we think there's a problem and want to do something about it—is enormously important and gratifying.

We in this room are scholars, educators, activists, therapists, students, artists, parents, rape crisis and domestic violence workers, and more. Some are established leaders in this movement, while others have only newly arrived at this critique and perhaps are new even to feminism itself. Together we have a wealth of knowledge, experience, and energy to start taking back our culture from the pornographers and other media pimps. But, like mountaineers embarking on a climb, we will do well to have a clear idea of where we are starting from, of how tall and steep the mountain is, and of what resources we do and do not have at our disposal for the climb.

Let me begin with a major caveat. Whenever we talk about patriarchy, either in general or any particular element, we need to bear in mind that the main problem is men: men's choices, men's ways of seeing and treating women, and in the case of pornography, the material that mostly men produce and sell mostly to other men. Nonetheless, women have to live and make our own choices in the world that men have made. That's unfair enough, but what's even more unfair is that, as with all forms of oppression, much of the burden of resistance inevitably falls on those who are oppressed. The resistance movement of and for women, against patriarchy, is called feminism, and its strength depends significantly on the cogency of the political analysis that underlies it.

With this in mind, I want to provide a bit of historical and conceptual backdrop for the further conversations we'll be having over the next two days. Here, then, is my five-minute thumbnail history of U.S. feminist perspectives on, and political action around, pornography over roughly the last thirty years.

How we got here

The early women's liberationists in the late 1960's and very early 1970's did not think very much about pornography, or at least they didn't write much about it. But this changed in the mid- to late seventies, no doubt due partly to pornography's increasing cultural visibility as well as to many feminists' growing focus on rape and other forms of male violence against women. To these early feminists, it was clear that pornography contained and conveyed the ideology of male supremacy in a particularly visceral and vicious form—that, as Robin Morgan famously put it in 1974, "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice."¹ Susan Brownmiller took up a similar theme as part of her 1975 book on rape, asserting—presciently, as it turned out—that "There can be no equality in porn, no female equivalent, no turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women . . . Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."²

The first feminist conference on pornography was held in San Francisco in 1978, and in October 1979, 5,000 women (accompanied by a few renegade men) marched on New York's Times Square to protest the industries of sexual exploitation. That same year saw the publication of Andrea Dworkin's searing and heartbreaking book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, and in 1980 Laura Lederer published *Take Back the Night*, the first major feminist anthology on the subject.

Now as feminists continued thinking about pornography and observing how it functions in the social world, many became inclined to revise Morgan's original dictum, to assert that pornography was not only a theory but also, itself, a practice—often of rape, and always of harm and subordination. This understanding animated the groundbreaking legal approach to pornography that Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon brought to fruition in their Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance. The Ordinance defined pornography as sex discrimination and allowed those harmed in and through pornography to sue for civil damages. It was passed by the Minneapolis City Council in 1983 and in several other municipalities thereafter, but higher courts later overturned it as unconstitutional.³

There was then, and there is now, room for reasonable and conscientious people to disagree about whether the Ordinance—in either its broad outlines or its specific details—was the best strategy for combatting pornography's harms. What occurred, however, was something far beyond this: an organized and vocal campaign by some self-described feminists, in open cooperation with the pornographers, not only to defeat the Ordinance but to mock and discredit the feminist critique on which it was based. Thus was the early feminist consensus around pornography shattered, much to the shock and dismay of many who had put so much of themselves into developing it.

Meanwhile—and, as I think, non-coincidentally—a conservative backlash movement in U.S. political culture had started to gather steam. Remember, this was the 1980's: Ronald Reagan was in office, busily undoing various progressive gains of the sixties and seventies and cheerily overseeing a spectacular resurgence of both social conservatism and unrestrained capitalism—a resurgence which, despite some respite on a few limited fronts during the Clinton years, continues escalating to this day. Backlash is meant to scare people and shut them up, and to some extent, almost inevitably, it succeeds. The whole point, after all, is to back us into a corner where we don't have much choice—or at least it seems to us that we don't have much choice—but to buckle under. But wait a minute, many women thought to themselves: feminism has taught us that we're not supposed to buckle under, that we're supposed to be powerful and independent and not take crap off of anybody (particularly any man). That sounds pretty good; we want that!

Now think about it: in this cultural and political context, a feminism that *acquiesces* to certain key male entitlements, while simultaneously presenting itself as bold and liberated and rebellious, is likely to be appealing to many women. A version of feminism that supports girls' and women's desired self-conception as independent and powerful, while actually requiring very little of them as far as confronting real male power, will similarly have wide appeal. It is my contention (now jumping ahead by a decade or so) that the versions of feminism currently most popular in the academy and in U.S. popular culture more broadly are of exactly this kind—and that the backlash dynamics I just described are on especially clear display with respect to the politics of pornography. After all, in one important sense, what happened in the eighties was *good* news: back then, the feminist critique of pornography had enough cultural, political, and intellectual momentum that an orchestrated campaign was required to defeat it. For at least the past decade, however, despite the best efforts of many of us in this room, that critique has largely dropped off the radar screen, replaced in some quarters by a depoliticized faux-feminism that caters to rather than challenging the porn culture.

Listen, for instance, to Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller in their 1999 book *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*: “We don't have a problem with pornography unless, of course, it doesn't turn us on,” they write. “We realize that American porn culture is here to stay. So rather than trying to rid the world of sexual images we think are negative, as some of our sisters have done, we're far more interested in encouraging women to explore porn, to find out whether it gets them hot or merely bothered ... While the female market for fuck films is still far less than that of men, it's a central tenet of our version of feminism to acknowledge that it exists at all.”⁴ At a certain level, the logic here is hard to fault: we can't defeat this beast, Karp and Stoller figure, so we might as well see if we can get our jollies from it too. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

This is a common and familiar phenomenon: we adjust our desires based on what's actually happening and on what we think is and is not possible. Philosophers have a useful term for the results of this process: "adaptive preferences."⁵ The basic idea is simple: if I can't have something (or think I can't have it), then it behooves me not to want that thing. Conversely, if I'm going to get something whether I like it or not, then I'll be happier if I can get myself to want it and like it. So people adapt their desires to fit their situations, rather than vice versa, thus minimizing the pain and cognitive dissonance of continuing to want something that they don't think they can get: "if you can't have what you want," as the saying goes, "then want what you have."

The concept of adaptive preferences is indispensable to understanding the self-reproducing dynamics of oppressive systems. In particular, I think it can help us understand the new brand of feminism of which I am, for the moment, taking Karp and Stoller as representatives—the brand that's sometimes called "do-me feminism," but for which the less polite moniker is "fuck-me feminism." One blogger sums it up as follows (unsympathetically but still, I think, pretty accurately):

"Fuck-me feminism ... is a school of thought that suggests [women] are empowered by reclaiming and controlling our own sexual objectification, by reclaiming the power of pornography and the sex industry for ourselves, and by flaunting our desire and willingness to have sex. In other words, being a man's sexual object can't hurt me if I want to be objectified; pornography and the sex industry can't degrade me if I enjoy it or if I profit from it; being used for sex can't devalue me if *I'm* using him too; being regarded as nothing more than a pussy to fuck can't dehumanize me if *I want* him to fuck my pussy."⁶

Now we should note an important theme here: that on this view, as far as feminism is concerned, it's not *what* I'm doing that matters, but whether I really *want* (or choose) to do it. File this away; I'll come back to it.

So here is the situation we now face. Over the last fifteen to twenty years—as you will learn at this conference, if you don't already know it—the pornography industry has exploded in size and reach, and its themes and messages have increasingly colonized the rest of popular culture. During that same period, mainstream commercial pornography has become steadily more suffused with overt degradation, humiliation, and violence. This much is disturbing enough. What's even more distressing is that, as pornography becomes both more brutal and more pervasive, we are offered a version of feminism that is less and less able to help us understand and resist it—a significantly depoliticized feminism inadequate to the task of challenging male power, especially (though not only) in its pornographic form. In the next section, I contrast this new version, or "wave," of feminism to the version that preceded it, and that—thankfully—still persists alongside it.

"Wave"-ing goodbye to radical feminism

For those uninitiated to the "wave" model of U.S. feminism, the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which focused most centrally on women's rights in marriage, and then later on the right to vote, is usually called the "first wave." The radical women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's, and to some degree into the 80's, is called the "second wave." Starting in the early 1990's, some young feminists began to identify as part of what they call the "third wave."

Now as many before me have pointed out, this "wave" model has a number of shortcomings. For one thing, it tends to downplay important feminist work, particularly by women of color, between, throughout, and independent of the "waves." Furthermore, at least as commonly deployed in feminist circles, it wrongly suggests that the differences under consideration are primarily generational rather than political. (I read somewhere recently that the third wave consists of feminists who were born between 1963 and 1973. While this definition has the virtue of clarity, it doesn't seem very useful otherwise; plus it yields the conclusion that I am a third-wave feminist, which I'm pretty sure I'm not.) It seems to me, on the contrary, that the difference between the second and the third wave is not, or is only loosely and accidentally, a matter of age or generation—that in fact, most of this much-vaunted difference ultimately reduces to the timeworn distinction between radical feminism and liberal feminism.

As an unrepentant (though generationally anomalous) second-wave feminist, let me attempt to articulate a very few central themes—three, to be exact—of second wave radical feminism, contrasting each in turn

with the perspectives of some self-described third-wave feminists.⁷ For the next few minutes I won't be addressing porn politics explicitly; I'll get back to those before long. There's a reason for this way of proceeding: in my opinion, the second wave got things right with respect to pornography *because* they got things right in their overall political analysis, in their understanding of how systems of oppression work and of how, therefore, such systems must be combatted. I'll try to illustrate this claim in what follows.

One claim central to second-wave radical feminism is that women are a class sharing a common condition. Now this claim sets off a lot of people's alarm bells, and sometimes with good reason, as it is subject to widely varying interpretations. If we take it to mean, for instance, that all women face the same problems, have the same beliefs, values, and priorities, make or ought to make the same choices in life, and so on, then it is clearly problematic. If we take it to mean that women are not also members of other politically important classes—racial, ethnic, economic, and so on—which multiply complicate their relationships to other women, to men, and to feminism, then it is clearly problematic. But the claim that women are a class sharing a common condition does not mean any of this. It means that there exist patriarchal forces and structures which, regardless of how any particular woman feels about them or chooses to relate to them, *objectively* function to uphold the power and privilege of men while keeping women as a group *down*. And this in turn means that, as Andrea Dworkin once put it, “the fate of every individual woman—no matter what her politics, character, values, qualities—is *tied* to the fate of all women whether she likes it or not.”⁸

So understood, the claim that women are a class sharing a common condition suggests a particular aim and purpose for feminist endeavor: namely, to figure out as best we can what serves the interests of women *as a class* (not just our own personal interests) and then to try as best we can—imperfectly, messily, but in good faith—to do that, support that, be that. Or, to put the same point a different way: what we do as feminists is figure out what the institutions, ideologies, and practices are that keep women down, and then try as best we can to challenge them, chip away at them, withdraw from them, take a sledgehammer to them, or in any other way diminish their power to harm and to subjugate women.

It is instructive to contrast this approach with an injunction commonly heard in third-wave circles: namely, “don't be ‘essentialist’.” Now again, it's important to clarify: charges of essentialism are often made in connection with the failure to recognize racial, class, and other such hierarchical differences among women. Although this is an important challenge, it is not the one I am targeting here. Rather I have in mind the oft-expressed reluctance among third-wave feminists to, as Jennifer Gilley has put it, “speak in an assumed—and potentially false—solidarity.”⁹ In short, the idea seems to be this: if I say that some act or institution X is bad, sexist, patriarchal, and so on, then I am implicitly assuming something about “all women” (that's the essentialism part): namely that, as women, they don't like and thus would never freely choose X. But then what about some woman somewhere who *does*, apparently, like or choose X? I must be saying she is stupid, self-deceived, and/or a bad feminist (or not a feminist at all)—and that doesn't seem like a nice or sisterly thing to say.

Second-wave feminists also famously developed the slogan that the personal is political. We all know this story: through formal and informal consciousness-raising, the women of the second wave discovered that various experiences that they had previously thought were unique to them—from sexual harassment to rape to feeling burdened by domestic labor—were in fact common to many women's lives. This discovery opened the door to seeing such experiences as having political and feminist significance, as *revealing* something about the condition of women as a group—rather than merely as unfortunate, but quirky, features of one's own personal life. Thus second-wave feminists newly claimed certain “personal” or “private” areas of life—home, sex, marriage, relationships, laundry, and more—as the domain of politics. Now this is great, in that it enables one to express righteously political outrage about all manner of things that one would previously have suffered in silence. But there's a flip side to it, too: in recognizing the personal as political, second-wave feminists also recognized and embraced responsibility for the broader implications and consequences of their own “personal” choices around everything from work, family, and parenting to beauty, sexuality, and self-defense.

Compare this perspective to that of third-wave author/activists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, who write in their book *Manifesta* that “feminism isn't about what choice you make but the freedom to make that choice.”¹⁰ It follows on this view that, in order to establish that one's choice in any given situation is a feminist one, one need only show that it is, in fact, really and authentically one's own choice—that, whatever one is doing, one has freely chosen to do it.

Now I'm going to ask you to indulge me in a bit of heavy theory here. Structurally speaking, as a person facing oppression of whatever kind, one has two choices. One can resist the oppression—in general, or in any particular instance—in which case one is likely to get viciously slapped down. Alternatively, one can obey, that is, act in ways that please the oppressors, perhaps in hopes of gaining some limited reward (or at least of avoiding the oppressive system's very worst consequences). As you may have noticed, neither option is altogether attractive; as the feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye points out, oppression systematically puts oppressed people in double binds, catch-22s, situations in which, as we say, they "can't win for losing."¹¹ But the crucial point for our purposes here is that one way, arguably the central way, in which oppressive systems perpetuate themselves is by giving individual members of the oppressed group an apparent stake in toeing the line. At the very least, we "go along to get along" in many situations, and we may find that the more we curry favor with those in power, the more we are rewarded on an individual basis.

Because of this dynamic, if some role or practice X harms women as a group in that it sustains and reinforces patriarchy, it is *utterly predictable* that some women will choose it. Thus, again, the essential feminist question is not whether some individual women like or choose or benefit in certain ways from X, but whether the overall *effect* of X is to keep women as a group subordinate to men.

Feminism is about ending the subordination of women. Expanding women's freedom of choice on a variety of fronts is an important part of that, but it is not the whole story. In fact, any meaningful liberation movement involves not only claiming the right to make choices, but also holding oneself accountable for the effects of those choices on oneself and on others.

I'll discuss just one more defining element of second-wave radical feminism here: namely, the notion of sexual politics. In the English language, the word "sex" is ambiguous: there's sex in the sense of male and female, and also in the sense of sexuality. Second wave feminism named "sex" in both senses as an arena of politics, that is, an arena in which power is exercised. In short, patriarchy makes sex (as male/female) into an unjust power hierarchy, which then manifests itself in many mutually reinforcing ways, including in and through sex (as sexuality). Whatever supports and maintains that power hierarchy is, from a second-wave point of view, problematic and wrong. If this includes, as it is almost sure to, certain ways of understanding and practicing sex (as sexuality), then these understandings and practices should be resisted and transformed. Furthermore, in second-wave thinking, challenging the sex-based power hierarchy itself requires challenging the very definitions of manhood and womanhood, of masculinity and femininity, on which it is premised: namely, masculinity as dominance and aggression, femininity as submission. These roles themselves are taken to be problematic, not just their coercive association with biological males and females respectively. Thus, on this view, for a woman to be sexually dominant (or a man submissive) does not constitute liberation, nor do instances of same necessarily count as resistance.

Now the third wave also has a take on sexual politics, that is, on the connections between power, sex as male and female, and sex as sexuality. They too believe that the power hierarchy placing men above women is unjust, but they have different ideas about what counts as challenging that hierarchy, particularly as it is expressed in sex-as-sexuality. On this view, for instance, a woman challenges the hierarchy when she plays a dominatrix role, or when she becomes a sexual consumer (for instance, using pornography or getting a lap dance at a strip club)—that is, when she adopts a standardly masculine set of sexual roles and activities. A woman also resists, on this view, when she uses the "power" of femininity—her beauty, her sex appeal and hotness, etc.—to her own perceived advantage. According to third-wave feminism, then, a woman can enact a liberatory and feminist sexual politics by adopting *either* a typically feminine *or* a typically masculine sexual role and persona, and running with it—as long as she does so freely and with the right attitudes and intentions.

The elements of third-wave feminist thought that I've discussed are in evidence virtually everywhere in contemporary feminism, but perhaps nowhere so clearly as in third-wave responses to the pornography issue. Consider, for instance, the idea that what we need to do is to make our own, alternative and feminist pornography. This has become such a standard response to radical feminist criticism that it is worth a few minutes of our attention. I don't take a stand here on whether it is possible or desirable to create sexually explicit material that expresses feminist values. Rather I look at some of the folks who claim to be doing that, at some of the materials they have produced and promoted, and at the *grounds* on which they claim those materials to be feminist ones.

Some claims made on behalf of purportedly-feminist pornography sound reasonable enough as far as they go—for instance, that by making and/or consuming pornography one asserts that it's OK for women to be sexual and to want sex, that women are not merely passive recipients of male sexual desire, but have sexual desires of our own. Furthermore, in "alt" or feminist pornography we do occasionally see women with something other than the Hollywood-prescribed body size and shape. (More often, the "alternative" appearance seems to consist mainly of tattoos and body piercings—but rarely does it involve having pubic hair, I've noticed.) But when we look at the statements of self-described feminist pornographers, the utterly liberal—even libertarian—politics at the core of this enterprise become unmistakable. At bottom, as it turns out, this pornography is said to be feminist because it is made by women, who are freely choosing to make it. For instance, Joanna Angel, a self-described feminist pornographer, has said that "you could do a porn where a girl is getting choked and hit and spit on, the guy's calling her a dirty slut and stuff and . . . that can still be feminist as long as everybody there is in control of what they're doing."¹² (Remember: it's not what you're doing, but whether you're doing it freely!)

Also clearly in evidence here is the idea that women can enact a liberatory sexual politics by embracing either standardly feminine or standardly masculine sexual roles and activities. Without an overriding critique of sexualized dominance, the perfectly reasonable claim that it's OK for women to want and seek sexual satisfaction shades easily into claiming women's right to be sexual dominators and consumers. And of course, at the core of the "feminist pornography" enterprise is the idea that women can and should redefine the feminized, pornographized sexual-object role as, itself, a form of power. (Again, when is it power? . . . when we freely choose it!) Thus it is that prominently featured on the website of "feminist pornographer" Nina Hartley is a new film entitled "O: The Power of Submission."¹³ Perusing Hartley's list of favorite links, one finds a site called Slave Next Door, which carries the tagline "real sexual slavery." The portal page of this website reads, in part, "Slave Next Door is the graphic depiction of a female sex slave's life and training for sexual slavery. It contains extreme bdsm situations and . . . sadistic training." In clicking to enter the site, one is told, one affirms that one is "not here in the capacity of law enforcement or religious activist."¹⁴

I am not saying that all of what goes under the banner of "feminist pornography" is this bad; I freely admit that I haven't seen all that much of it. But I will say that I have never once read or heard an account of what *constitutes* feminist pornography—that is, of what makes it feminist—that does not conform to the analysis I've described here as liberal and third-wave. That analysis, I've contended, is mistaken and dangerous in that it encourages a willful myopia with respect to the role of one's choices in a broader system of sexualized dominance. That myopia, in fact—with the freedom it grants us to pretty much do as we please like good American consumers—is precisely its appeal. That's why it's hard to combat. Yet unless we can find ways to articulate a radical feminist vision that can move and inspire people while also challenging them to take themselves seriously as agents of change, we will continue to lose this battle. What, then, shall we do?

Some ideas for moving forward

To begin with the obvious, we need more people, more of the time, out there presenting the radical feminist critique. I happen to know for a fact, for instance, that many bright and well-intentioned young people are toeing the third-wave, sexual-libertarian line because it's *all they've been taught* in their women's studies classes. And of course, many people outside the academy have very little exposure to feminist critiques of virtually anything. So part of this is a sheer labor problem. We need more bodies and more voices; hence this conference. But not only do we need more people doing and saying the same things, I think that we also need to do and say some different things, or at least some additional things. As the porn culture becomes ever more pervasive and soul-destroying, and as it starts to directly affect more people's lives in ways they're aware of, many people really are looking for a way out. The problem is that they don't see any alternative, and much of what they're told is different and alternative really isn't.

For instance, the cultural and political force that presents itself to most mainstream Americans as an alternative—indeed, as the only alternative—to the porn culture is a religious, predominantly Christian, social conservatism. Now you and I know that's no good, and part of the appeal of third-wave, pro-porn politics resides in its apparent rebellion against such conservatism. This leads me to my first suggestion about how to frame our critique of the porn culture: namely by showing that—contrary to popular belief—conservative and pornographic ideologies of sex and gender are very nearly synonymous, the

surface differences between the two obscuring their fundamental unity. As radical feminists have long observed, male sexual ownership and control of women is a matter of fundamental *agreement* between the male-defined political right and the almost equally male-defined political left. The right typically supports the private male ownership of women one at a time, as wives and daughters, localized in the home and the “traditional family”; whereas the left too often defends men’s collective sexual ownership of women outside the home, in the “public domain,” including in pornography and prostitution. To reject *both* forms of male sexual ownership, as radical feminists do, is thus to commit the ultimate heresy.

Yet only such principled rejection can effectively challenge the sexual abuse and commodification of women and girls both inside and outside the “traditional family.” Until we find ways to communicate the linked dangers of *both* forms of male control, the fear of one form will continue to send women and girls directly into the lap of the other. The conservatives say to us, “Hey, ladies, don’t like what you see in the pornography? Ugly, isn’t it? You say you don’t want that to happen to you, or for men to think of you like that? Well, then, be good girls and keep your legs closed. Be abstinent until marriage, and then God says your husband has to honor and value you and protect you from other men. (You just have to obey him.)” Meanwhile, women and girls who recognize the patriarchal trap of “traditional family values” are urged to demonstrate their independence and rebellion against said values by buying a stripper pole and learning to lapdance. “What? You say that doesn’t seem like authentic female sexuality or sexual liberation to you? What are you, a right-wing anti-sex prude?”

This surface conflict in sexual ideology between right and left serves male power by masking a deeper agreement. For both camps, after all, it is an article of faith that sex makes women dirty, cheap, less valuable—that being fucked literally de-grades women and girls. Furthermore, in both camps, women and girls are systematically made to suffer for having sex. In the world of pornography, the sex itself—aggressive, hostile, humiliating—is the punishment, the mechanism by which men viscerally experience their manhood by putting women in our place. In the world of “traditional family values,” the suffering of shame, stigma, unwanted pregnancy (or at least the fear of it), and forced childbirth is a woman’s just punishment for having had sex that she shouldn’t have had. And in both worlds we hear the constant refrain—sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted—“Bitch. Slut. Dirty whore. You’re getting what you deserve.” As Andrea Dworkin once put it, “Pretending to argue, they collude. And if one don’t get you, the other will.”¹⁵

As daunting as this convergence is, it also suggests a certain hermeneutic of feminist resistance—one that, happily, is pretty easy to communicate. People who care about justice and who want a way out of the porn culture need to act and think in ways that won’t make *either* bunch of woman-haters happy. If you’re doing and saying things that the Jerry Falwells and Larry Flynts of the world *both* really hate, then you’re on the right track!

So that’s my first suggestion. My second suggestion is that we connect our critique of pornography and the porn culture to a broader critique of the commodification of everyday life and, in so doing, promote a non-marketized conception of freedom. Now that’s a mouthful, I know. To start illustrating it, I want to share with you a couple of anecdotes from my recent trip to a college which shall remain nameless, but which is known both for its stellar academics and for its progressive politics. I’ll call it “Alt College.”

Overall, my visit to Alt College was wonderful: I visited some classes and gave an anti-pornography slideshow in the evening to a large and receptive audience. During the question-and-answer period that followed, a young woman raised her hand. Clearly troubled by what she had heard and seen, she asked, “Well, what if we all just get together and tell the porn industry that this isn’t what we want—that we want something more complex, more diverse, less hateful and one-dimensional? Wouldn’t they have to change their ways and give us what we want?”

There are many assumptions lurking in this query that we would do well to challenge, but what I want to highlight is the faith that’s being shown in the wonders of the capitalist marketplace. To this very bright, progressive, feminist young woman, here in this bastion of liberal-to-radical politics, it seemed plausible to think that—in this connection at least—the market will solve all of our problems. Now in making this assumption, there is something important that she fails to understand, namely that the cultural products of mega-corporations are much more like advertising than they are like art. When powerful and profit-hungry entities go hunting for market share at any cost, what those entities will produce and sell is

whatever gets the *most* people in the gut the *fastest* and makes them want *more of that now*. This will never be equality. It will never be complexity. It will never be anything thoughtful or meaningful or reflective. Not ever.

Let me share one more anecdote from Alt College that will help me go a bit deeper with this idea. That afternoon, I had visited the Gender Studies senior seminar course to talk with the students about feminist politics and pornography. At one point in the discussion, a young woman raised her hand, and here is what she said: “Well, these days things are different. People in my generation want sexuality to be an important part of their lives; they want to be free and open with their sexuality. So that’s why they want to make and use pornography.” There’s a sweet kind of humor here: every generation thinks it invented sex! But more relevantly for our purposes, there are two *massive* assumptions underlying this young woman’s comment, both of which we need to challenge whenever we see an opening to do so.

The first assumption is that, for some experience or activity to be important, real, and considerable, it must be made into an image: take a picture, roll video, turn on the webcam. As Gail [Dines] is fond of pointing out, we live in an image-based culture. Everything has to be made into an image, and we derive our conception of who and what we are largely from the images that surround us. But here is a question: when you are doing something—virtually anything—are you more or less free in doing it when you know someone is watching? What if they’re taking pictures? What if they’re going to show those pictures to a whole bunch of people you don’t even know? (Are you feeling free yet?) For instance, do you dance crazier and more freely when you’re by yourself in your bedroom, or out at the nightclub when your image is being projected on the big screen?

The second assumption underlying this young woman’s comment is that, for some experience or activity to be important, real, and considerable, it must be made into a commodity (that is, bought and sold). But here is another question: when you put some activity into the marketplace—that is, you decide to sell it instead of just doing it—does that make you more or less free in doing it? For instance, suppose you like to make music. Up until now it’s been a hobby, something you do in your spare time, but now you’ve decided that you want to get signed with a major label. All of a sudden you’re not free to make any old kind of music you want, are you? Now it’s “What do they think they can sell? What’s in vogue this week, and are you it, and if not, can they make you into it?”

So we face a bizarre phenomenon in many discussions of pornography, in that it’s only with respect to sex that many otherwise progressive and leftist people assume that putting something into the capitalist marketplace makes it *more* free (or is evidence that one is free in doing it). We need to find ways to challenge the naïve and regressive conceptions of freedom as the freedom to enter the marketplace and/or to choose among the options that the marketplace offers us. We need to suggest to people that—in many everyday contexts, but perhaps especially for the most intimate and potentially-creative activities of our lives, like sex and sexuality—*real* freedom in that activity means neither selling it nor letting somebody with a profit motive tell us what it is supposed to look and feel like.

My final suggestion this morning is one that’s been made before, and that is that we need a vision of alternatives. The makers of ostensibly-feminist porn claim to be providing such a vision, and that’s why their message is appealing to many: we sense a need for alternatives, and that need is real, but more commodified images *isn’t it* (and particularly not the ones they’re giving us). But it is true that our side needs to be more than just, as Dworkin once aptly put it, “the morbid side of the women’s movement.”¹⁶ There’s something to that, inevitably, and rightly so: there is no way to face down the industries of sexual exploitation without confronting some very ugly realities. We must not flinch from that task, and we must continue to find ways to help others face those realities without dying inside. But we can’t *just* be “Atrocities R Us.” We have to give people (including ourselves) some inspiration and some room to move. This is a tall order and I’m almost out of time, but in closing, here are three quick ideas for moving in this direction.

First, note the connection to my point about withdrawing from the market. To open up the space for new thinking and experimentation, we need to detox, to get out of the path of the porn culture’s cynical, manipulative, and hateful messages. To start thinking our own thoughts and dreaming our own dreams, first we have to get away from the bastards who are shouting at us through megaphones. Second, we need to draw on our own experiences of love and sex as joy and communion (and encourage others to draw on

theirs). As radical feminists have long emphasized, patriarchy constructs our sexuality very profoundly, and even the most enlightened among us are not immune to that construction. But the construction, for most people at least, does not go “all the way down.” Despite everything, many people do have experiences of mutual and egalitarian sexuality—or at least hints or glimmers of it—and that’s really good news. We need to encourage people to tap into these experiences, hints, and glimmers—to remember what they know from their own lives, that no pimp or corporation sold to them or ever could, and to want more of it.

Third and finally, as we continue to tell people what sexual freedom isn’t, we should also encourage them to think deeply and creatively about what it is. What would *real* sexual freedom look and feel like—the kind that everyone can have, instead of the kind that amounts to freedom for some at others’ expense? We need to richly imagine, and encourage others to richly imagine, another world: one in which no woman or girl is ever called “slut,” “prude,” “bitch,” “cunt,” or “dyke”; in which no woman, man, or child ever has to fear rape or suffer its damage to their spirits; in which men do not control their own and other men’s behavior by the threat of being seen and treated as women; and in which lesbian love and connection is not reduced to a pornographic fetish for men. In this world, every woman and girl sees her own body as beautiful, no man or boy is made to see his as a weapon, and people take part in sexual activity only when (and only because) they expect to enjoy it and to be honored and fulfilled therein. It can be painful to think in this way, because we become more acutely aware of just how far away we are from this better world. But the third wave has one thing right: desire can be, or can become, a form of power. We need to use the power of our desire for this world—our desire to bring it into being for ourselves and for our children and our grandchildren—to unite us and to animate our thinking and strategizing about how to take our culture back from the pornographers.

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notes

1. Robin Morgan, “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,” in *The Word of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches 1968-1992* (W.W. Norton, 1992).
2. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Simon and Schuster, 1975).
3. For a full explanation of the Ordinance and a defense of its constitutionality, see Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988). The book is out of print, but the full text is available at <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/other/ordinance/newday/TOC.htm>.
4. Karp and Stoller, eds., *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (New York: Penguin, 1999).
5. See Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a specifically feminist discussion, see Martha Nussbaum, “Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Options,” *Economics and Philosophy* 17: 67-88. Ann Cudd discusses adaptive preferences (or, as she calls them, “deformed desires”) in Chapter 6 of her *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
6. See <http://saucebox.almeidaisgod.com/?p=76>
7. Like virtually any political movement or school of thought, “third wave feminism” is not a monolithic entity, and not everyone who identifies as a third wave feminist will agree with all (or any) of the views described herein as prototypically third wave. Furthermore, many third wave feminists (including some whose writings I cite here) have done valuable political work on a number of fronts.

8. Andrea Dworkin, *Right Wing Women* (Perigee Books, 1983), p. 220.
9. Jennifer Gilley, "Writings of the Third Wave: Young Feminists in Conversation," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44(3): 187-198.
10. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000).
11. See Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983).
12. From an interview conducted by Chyng Sun on May 1, 2005, for the latter's film (forthcoming from Media Education Foundation, fall 2007) and book (forthcoming from Peter Lang, 2009), both titled *The Price of "Pleasure": Pornography, Sexualities and Relationships*.
13. See <http://www.nina.com/> (accessed on March 20, 2007).
14. See <http://slavenextdoor.com/>. Both this site and Hartley's list of favorite sites including it were accessed on March 20, 2007. Although this site does not, itself, claim to be feminist pornography, it is being promoted by a self-proclaimed feminist pornographer.
15. Andrea Dworkin, "Women in the Public Domain: Sexual Harassment and Date Rape," in her *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women* (Free Press, 1997). p. 199.
16. Andrea Dworkin, "Feminism: An Agenda," in *Letters From a War Zone* (Lawrence Hill Books, 1993), p. 133.



Little Women, Big Men

Women's Lives, An American's Eyes

**In Remembrance of Mary Daly:
Lessons for the Movement**