

Hope, Possibility, and Cruelty:  
Porn Consumption and Neoliberalism's Everyday Affective Subjects

by

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## ABSTRACT

In the wake of the post-2000s internet and technology boom, with the nearly simultaneous introduction of smartphones, tablet, iPads, and online video streaming, another moral panic around pornography has reared its head. While much has been written about pornography from the perspective of media analysis and, more recently, ethnographic work of the industry and with performers themselves, very little work has been done with consumers. What has been undertaken, by psychologists and antiporn academics in particular, suffers an unfortunate lack of diversity in terms of how consumers are defined. That is, psychologists and antiporn academics alike appear to think only white hetero men consume porn. This research realizes its significance through the idea that porn looks and feels differently, and expresses different meanings through the historical and intersecting relations to power of a consumer, even in the young heterosexual men that antiporn feminists are so keen on using as a strawman for all porn consumption. With the help of an intersectional affects framework, I am able to articulate the manner in which pornography puts bodies in motion before the mind undertakes a hermeneutical exercise fundamentally framed by the consumer's knowledge and subjectivity, which muddles how antiporn's speech act approaches presume a direct propositional transmission from a pornographic object to the consumer. A digital object of any kind becomes pornography when it is used as such (Magnus Ullén, 2013); there is no necessary or logical consequence that outside of such a context that the object is inherently or intentionally an object of pornography (Mary Mikkola, 2017). With the help of my participants, I expose the manner in which subjective and intersubjective flows of affects expose entanglements of hope, possibility, and cruelty for porn consumers qua

affective subjects. This is particularly the case for those non-majoritarian subjects whose promise of sexual citizenship and/or legibility, within neoliberalism's single-issue progress narrative and linear temporality, rests on both the transposition of illegibility and non-citizenship elsewhere, as well as the subject's willingness to fix, label, and thereby commodify their desires as affective labor.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION  
WHY PORN?

HETEROGENIZING THE CONSUMER

Who consumes porn and why do they do it? More importantly, do they consume it in the same way? In the wake of the post-2000s internet and technology boom, with the nearly simultaneous introduction of smartphones, tablet, iPads, and online video streaming, another moral panic around pornography has reared its head, the genealogy of which I cover in chapter 2, The Porn Wars. While much has been written about pornography from the perspective of media analysis and, more recently, ethnographic work of the industry and with performers themselves, very little work has been done with consumers. What has been undertaken, by psychologists and antiporn academics in particular, suffers a lack of diversity in terms of how consumers are defined. That is, psychologists and antiporn academics alike appear to think only white hetero men consume porn. Moreover, in their “appeals to emotional truths,” antiporn academics undermine certain testimonies in favor of those who “present themselves as addicts, victims, or rescuers” (Clarissa Smith & Feona Atwood, 2013, p. 54). Apprehending the lack of diverse and nuanced consumer research, Simon Lindgren (2010) urgently states that “the need for audience studies has become all the more urgent now that ... pornography has moved online” (p. 171). Echoing as well as expanding that call, Lorelei Lee (2013) writes in *The Feminist Porn Book: the Politics of Producing Pleasure* that many scholars on porn fail

to consider how intersections of race, religion, class, sexual orientation, among other relations to power, effect the conditions and experiences of consumption.

My work, which endeavors to shed some light on the lacunae discussed above, finds its primary inspiration in my own historical relationship with porn. Throughout my youth and early adulthood, porn consumption served a myriad of functions; and porn, even within the same genre, expressed a number of meanings over time. More importantly, porn added a richness to my life that I could not attain in any other space. The relationship was not always a straightforward or happy one.

To discuss the entirety of that relationship is a book in itself. I can, however, provide three brief examples from my teens to early twenties (in that order). First, before having viewed porn with hetero men having sex with gay men or hetero men *watching* gay sex and masturbating—particularly, those in which the performers give a kind of pre or post scene interview as well—I lacked a community narrative allowing me to understand how gay fantasies were something apart from being or heading toward being gay or bisexual. This allowed me to expand my own intermittent and ambivalent gay fantasies into intermittent and still ambivalent gay porn consumption without necessarily feeling as if I were perverted or ill in some capacity, despite the fact that my straight friends would not understand had I told them. Second, I once showed a close friend a gonzo porn I found particularly hot because of how much pleasure the woman performer expressed. He emphatically disagreed, countering with the personal fact that he could only be turned on if it appeared as if the woman were actually coerced into the scene. I never thought about actual coercion or rape being the case within porn. I neither

understood<sup>1</sup> how he could have such a desire, nor was I able to enjoy the porn he recommended. I did not, however, stop consuming hardcore porn that played with coercion or reluctance, whenever it was apparent that all performers were enjoying themselves. Finally, I began to notice how my relationship to porn shifted depending on the friends and sexual partners I had at any time. Sometimes I felt very sure about my porn consumption. It allowed me to explore fantasies I did not necessarily intend to explore physically. It also showed me countless amounts of sexual positions and ways to receive and give pleasure, which I employed in my sexual relationships to virtually wholly positive responses. Simultaneously, when in the company of certain lovers, friends, or family who were not comfortable discussing, watching, or even thinking about porn, I too began to feel ill about my porn consumption. To be sure, there were moments of critique that I took to heart. It was part of maturing into an ethical and cognizant hetero Hispanic man, far as I saw it then and see it now.

Although I could not necessarily articulate it before I began research, I had the idea that porn consumption must play innumerable functions and express innumerable meanings to people depending on who they are, where they live, and who surrounds them, all of which is necessarily in constant flux. Yet, throughout my early investigation and general cognizance of the issue, I noted how both mainstream narratives and the majority of scholarly literature render porn consumption as a fixed scenario—i.e. x porn is y to subject z—and, more problematically, a decidedly negative one. Moreover, that porn *teaches* a subject such and such—with no entanglement or interplay between a

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<sup>1</sup> That is, until I began to learn more about (and sometimes indirectly experience) his highly troubling family life.



subject's positionality, knowledge, or agency— appeared to be the popular strategy among those most concerned with painting pornography in a negative light. While torn then, I now emphatically disagree for at least two reasons. One, legitimation, exploration, and agency in my desires, as made possible through porn, has brought a kind of vitalization and intimacy to my own body and intimacy with the body of others that I could not have attained in the public sphere without shame or violence. Two, as a hetero Hispanic man, ambiguously brown and raised in a middle-to-upper-middle-class home, I have had the privilege to live my life in a kind of safety and legibility not available to others. If I experienced some form of self-understanding, multiple modalities of pleasure, and novel forms of intimacy through porn, then to what degree have those been experienced by others who are far less privileged than I? Moreover, even for those who are privileged like me, or even more so in their whiteness, does that mean they all consume porn in the same way?

Using an intersectional<sup>2</sup> affects<sup>3</sup> framework, I articulate the manner in which pornography puts bodies in motion before the mind undertakes a hermeneutical exercise fundamentally framed by the consumer's knowledge and subjectivity. This starting point challenges the speech act approach of antiporn scholars and activists who presume a direct propositional transmission from a pornographic object to the consumer—a virus-like message that commandeers the (presumed heterosexual and male) consumer's hermeneutical and epistemic capacities, thereby, constituting negative teleological and

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<sup>2</sup> Defined as relations to power.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 4 for my full formulation of affects.

ontological conditions of women and arousal<sup>4</sup>. To clarify, I formulate affect as a preideological and presubjective flow of feeling, occurring on micro and macro discursive levels. Affects are preideological in the sense that they are taught and already in circulation before a subject's nascence. Affects are presubjective in that they occur in the body before the mind performs any kind of hermeneutic on them—that is, before the mind constructs an emotion or proposition about the experience of such and such affects (Sarah Ahmed, 2010; Lauren Berlant 2011, Shaka McGlotten, 2013). In chapter 4, I further parse and explicate multiple modalities of affects particular to porn consumption that I call erotic affects.

My approach to this qualitative project takes as a point of launch Sarah Ahmed's (2010) idea "that things might have an affective life as a result of being given or bestowed with affect" (p. 27). That is, I hold it to be the case that virtually all ideas and objects, animate or inanimate, analogue or digital, are de facto instilled, pre-encounter, with a lively, felt relation that diverges in degree, sometimes in kind, from person to person. Where does this instilling come from? Historical and ideological discourses occurring at national, local, and interpersonal levels. While mine is not a phenomenological thesis—and I am cognizant of the close ties between phenomenology and affect theory—I also draw on Jaqueline M. Martinez, who in her work, *Communicative Sexualities: A Communicology of Experience*, attests to the necessity of recognizing "that we exist in an inextricably intersubjective condition that precedes us and sets the conditions for our conscious awareness" (2011, p. 55), which is to state more

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<sup>4</sup> By teleological, I mean, the *why* of women's existence and men's own arousal—e.g. women exist solely for men's pleasure. By ontological, I mean fixing the boundaries of what constitutes a woman and what constitutes proper arousal.

elegantly what I, explicating Ahmed, stated before. In other words, just as a “study of our experience of sexuality must examine the very terms and conditions in which it became possible to have had the experience we did” (p. 95), a study of the effects and affectivity of pornography, intertwined as it is with sexuality and desire, must also examine the conditions, the bodily, historical and spatial context, through which the experience occurs. Lastly, while Ahmed (2010) does not necessarily map atmosphere onto digital landscapes, it is no stretch to demonstrate the ways in which our angle of arrival to pornography—as defined by our history, location, and relations to power<sup>5</sup>—affects the impressions we receive and, as an effect of site algorithms and community networking, how porn sites present themselves in exchange.

As put plainly by Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hills, Michael Petit (2015, p. 17), “affect must always be understood in relation to the specificity of the technical media that enable it.” In this study, this requires taking note of both the devices and digital spaces from/within which we consume porn. By “digital spaces” I mean two things: 1) online sites where porn can be consumed<sup>6</sup> and 2) digital objects of delivery such as an image or image macro, video streaming, or a GIF. In (1), I employ the phrase “online sites where porn can be consumed” for the purpose of opening up a definition of the pornographic to include whatever participants consume as and deem pornography. A digital object of any

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<sup>5</sup> That is, *intersectionality* **not** understood as how intersections of race, gender, and class map onto one’s identity, but how one undergoes subject development, emotional development and expression, and navigation of public and private spaces through and under intersections of racist, gendered, sexualized, and classed ideologies which simultaneously, at all times, regulate, interpret, legitimate, object, open up or close them off (Ange-Marie Hancock 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Not all porn is consumed on sites that are strictly pornographic in intention or design—e.g. Tumblr, Reddit, YouTube.

kind becomes pornography when it is used as such (Magnus Ullén, 2013); there is no necessary or logical consequence that outside of such a context the object remains inherently or intentionally an object of pornography (Mary Mikkola, 2017). In particular, Ullén (2013) states that “certain texts become pornographic in certain situations ... pornography designates not so much a given category of texts, as a set of historically specifiable situations” (p. 323). While I find Ullén’s framing of pornography quite generative, I disagree with his assertion, following from both this situational capture of the pornographic object and Slavoj Žižek’s (2008) “practical solipsism” of the capitalist consumer, that “surplus sexual enjoyment is not the voyeuristic one of taking pleasure in watching others perform, it is the solipsistic one of imagining that their performance exists only *for me*<sup>7</sup>” (2013, p. 338). To accept this assertion, one must also accept the propositional—that is, speech act model—approach to pornography consumption, as if there were some preconscious proposition such as “I am yours whenever you want me” in transmission. Moreover, as Ullén states, given his solipsistic situational approach to what pornography means to any given consumer, many of the problems analyzed within pornography by antiporn academics are less a problem with pornography itself than our historical situation. I can agree with that latter claim. However, rather than having that simple conclusion follow from his solipsistic approach, I, with the help of my participants, expose the manner in which subjective and intersubjective flows of affects expose entanglements of hope, possibility, and cruelty for porn consumers qua affective subjects—particularly those nonmajoritarians who exist precariously within neoliberalism’s weighted and stretched-out present (Lauren Berlant, 2011; José Esteban

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<sup>7</sup> Ullén’s emphasis.

Muñoz, 2009). Neither Ullén’s speech act approach nor antiporn speech act approaches permit the exposure of analysis of these entanglements.

My analysis draws on hour-long, one-on-one interviews that I conducted with 7 young men of disparate backgrounds, aged 18-22, who consume diverse pornographies on a habitual basis, which I defined as at least 2-3 times per week. Despite commonalities of age, geographical location, and education, these men widely differ in race, religion, class, sexual orientation, and their cisgender, transgender, or non-binary status. As a matter of comparative analysis, I also analyze transcripts from a one hour focus group that I conducted. Participants included 5 interviewees from the first phase of my study and 1 new participant not interviewed outside of the focus group. Both the interviews and the focus group were conducted in an informal, conversational manner in which the participants and I engaged in a dialogic conversation for as long as a participant wanted on 4 particular topics: types of devices and digital spaces through which participant consumes porn, genres of pornography participant has consumed, the manner in which a participant navigates and explores porn, and self-reflections on how particularities within porn (objects, positions, camera angles, body parts, etc.) effect masturbation. An informal and conversational approach allowed participants to relax and feel that they could speak to topics on a felt level without being pressured to provide a specific answer that I may have been looking for. If and when participants digressed too far off course, I would lead them back to the topic at hand through prodding—e.g. “But what about *x* specifically made you laugh?” or “Don’t stop now, tell me more.”

Referring to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Johnny Saldaña’s *The Coding Manual for Qualitative*

*Researchers*, I draw out analytics and concepts through multilayered applications of Concept Coding<sup>8</sup> and Values Coding<sup>9</sup>.

In *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, Gail Dines anecdotally refers to the ways men react to her vehemently antiporn lecture tours—that is, how they often react angrily, walking out in the middle of the lecture or raising their voices in post-lecture discussion. For Dines, this somehow further justifies the need for antiporn work. While I am not sure how she does not see the problems with her interpretation of their reactions, and ultimately, the conclusions she reached as a result of her interpretations<sup>10</sup>, I took a kind of indirect inspiration from her. Prior to commencing either my interviews or focus group discussion, I provided a brief summary of the porn wars, past and present, with my participants. I also let participants know my stance as a feminist scholar who does not fully align with either camp, and that this research does not shy away from, indeed requires, knowledge of user’s fears, anxieties, and ethical dilemmas regarding their own porn use. I did this with the hope that participants would be more apt to share experiences they would otherwise withhold or obscure from someone openly antiporn or

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<sup>8</sup> Given this method is used to “transcend the particular participants of your fieldwork and to progress toward the *idea* suggested by the study” (Johnny Saldaña, 2016, p. 120), Concept Coding enabled me to articulate a set number of erotic modalities of affect (see chapter 4), in part through the conglomeration of In Vivo codes with strong association.

<sup>9</sup> According to Saldaña (2016), Values Coding works best in exposing “the complex interplay, influence, and affect between” the “cultural values and belief systems, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experience and actions” in qualitative analysis (p. 132). This method helped me understand how participants took part in the exchange of affects with the spaces through which they consumed porn. It also illuminated how heteronormativity, which instantiates its own particular array of affects, expresses its flows and intensities differently through my consumers depending on their intersecting relations to power and life histories.

<sup>10</sup> How can she give a lecture in which young men are her primary target of shaming—on a weak premise, as I will show in chapter 2—and not expect anger? It proves nothing more than *that* she pissed young men off and not *why* men would react that way.

who withheld their own position. It is my belief, as any reader ought to see, that this final approach succeeded for one reason in particular: my thesis is not directly concerned with discovering once and for all whether porn is good or bad, harmful or harmless. Rather, I am concerned with participants' subjective reflections on felt atmospheres, digital-to-body and body-to-digital exchanges, and deep resonances.

Participants were not selected by a particular criteria outside of identifying as a man under an open set of conditions that included transmen, pre or post op, and non-binary but read as men in presentation. They elected to participate by responding to flyers outlining the project that I posted around the ASU campus. Participants responded through phone calls or text messages so as to retain anonymity, providing me with a pseudonym on that initial conversation. Rather than selecting for certain criteria, I gathered as diverse a group of men as possible given that a large part of my project is to understand how heteronormativity and progressive neoliberal narratives range over the desires and manner of porn consumption on a number of young men with differing intersecting relations to power. Women—defined as openly as I have defined men—were not made a part of this study given the time restraints of this thesis, and the fact that my gender can serve as a barrier to participant comfort and ability to speak candidly on certain subject matter. Overall, there are 5 related arguments that build upon each other at play throughout this thesis.

First, whatever it is that pornography does, it occurs nonpropositionally through multimodal erotic affects, not through speech acts. Such affects are modulated, however, by the discursive conditions—from interpersonal to national—under which a participant develops. It is also in this sense that I make the claim that antiporn literature showcases a

lesson in affect, where it is intensely modulated by heteronormativity, more than a lesson in what porn actually is or could be. Second, and relatedly, heteronormativity is a condition manifested and experienced through a nationalized affective landscape that, in its contemporary formulation, finds its nascence in consumer capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century. While I point this out early on, I do not fully flesh out this latter argument until chapter 5.

Third, pornography capacitates a space for participants to experience an intense wholeness or veracity of the self, an ostensibly de facto legitimation of and legibility to their subjective object-desire alignment. I say ostensibly de facto as opposed to merely de facto or de jure given that certain object-desire relations cannot be found in the public sphere without social or legal consequence. At the same time, we can reformulate that experience as a kind of alleviation to neoliberalism's demand for identification of a core sexual self. Participants, as neoliberal subjects, reveal that ontological weight through discursive elements employed in their articulations of—that is, in giving language to—the circulation of erotic affects engendered through porn. In addition, race becomes a strong modulator of how this process unfolds and becomes understood. Given that a majority of my participants were white, my participants help me to illuminate how whiteness as modulated by other intersecting relations such as gender and/or sexuality and/or class becomes an ever shifting relation to power and, consequentially, one's body and desires. I also address the manner in which whiteness-as-heteronormativity—whereby subjects experience the pressure to align their affective labors to whiteness—effects certain non-white participants' experiences and articulations of their sexuality and porn consumption.



Fourth, if it is the case that neoliberal progress narrative require essentialist claims to parsed aspects of identity (race, gender, or ability, for example), and porn capacitates the experience of a core sexual identity through the circulation of intense multimodal erotic affects, then pornography serves as a neoliberal technology. Moreover, internet porn, as a space not untouched by heterosexist and masculinist hermeneutics, ableism, and white supremacy, also debilitates what it simultaneously offers to nonmajoritarian<sup>11</sup> sexualities.

Lastly, it is a particular kind of cruelty for nonnormative subjects that internet porn offers up a space of legitimation and legibility (something normative subjects experience as a part of the everyday), not because porn qua the recording of sex acts, in all of its actual diversity, or the consumption of porn are inherently ill. Rather, it is only under the nationalization of heteronormativity (and its concomitant affects), the ubiquity of capitalism (and its proliferation of heteronormative affects), linear temporality under neocolonialism, and the consequential single-issue narrative of progressive neoliberalism that porn consumption *becomes* simultaneously beneficial and cruel.

## LAYOUT OF CHAPTERS

In chapter 2, I argue that speech act approaches and question-begged heteronormativity, which have historically framed antiporn literature, consequently miss the mark on many otherwise serious concerns with porn consumption as a neoliberal form of social control.

In particular, speech act approaches lack a framework for attending to the social

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<sup>11</sup> I use nonnormative and nonmajoritarian interchangeably throughout this thesis, as either points to an outsider, abject, and/or illegible positionality.

construction of sexuality as a modern phenomenon. The first section briefly overviews the porn wars of the 1980s, particularly discussions on women's autonomy and Catherine MacKinnon's speech act approach, an approach undertaken by all preceding antiporn scholars. The following but connected segment reviews contemporary antiporn arguments, highlighting how heterosexist hermeneutics, speech acts, and addiction models have been deployed, and to what end(s). The third and final section offers an overview of rebuttals from contemporary nuanced proporn literature, in which my work finds its place. While further developed in a later chapter, I begin a discussion of the ways in which theories of affect both explain *why* antiporn literature refuses and ignores the theoretical contributions from queer and queer of color critique, as well as *how* and *why* consumers diverge in their relations to multiple pornographies.<sup>12</sup>

In chapter 3, I argue that in situating participants, we can attain a glimpse at both macro and micro affective networks through which consumers interpret, experience, and ultimately navigate porn, something lacking in research previously conducted on audiences/consumers. Chapter 3 is organized into 3 sections. The first lays out the reasoning behind my approach to this chapter. The following section on participants' angle of arrival is further divided into 8 subsections, each of which are titled by the chosen pseudonym of each of my participants, followed by a descriptive summary, including their intersecting demographics, their family background, and their past and current ethical beliefs. The third and final section, captures the role that raced and

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<sup>12</sup> That is, in addition to genres, the modes of pornography itself—commercial, amateur, do-it-yourself (DIY), realcore—and the multiple digital spaces, not all of which are explicitly for porn, through which they are consumed.

gendered sexualities—as modulated and experienced under heteronormativity—plays in participant consumption of porn.

Chapter 4 argues that while heterosexuality and being queer are neither stable nor dichotomous, even as they strongly frame the affective fields within which the participants consume or even *do* porn, proximity to heteronormativity is a significant influence on participants’ self-policing of desires; it also shapes their perceptions about what within porn can be taken for granted, including one-dimensional and race-based ill representations of gendered sexuality or the more insidious fact that most of the porn readily available on a given porn site is white unless one specifies a race. Moreover, I make initial claims on both the possibilities and *limits* that porn, as a brick-and-mortar industry of capitalism, even in its user-generated forms capacitated by otherwise commercial sites, offers to consumers who use or make porn (or both) in terms of purposes of identity formation, community affiliations, and/or disidentification and disaffiliation. In the first section, I explicate the frameworks that I’ve used to guide my analysis. Specifically, I discuss the ways in which my analytic framework is grounded within theories about affect, as well as those around sexualities. The second section fleshes out mediums of affect—that is, participants’ disparate relations and responses to the devices through which they consume porn, actively or even passively, as in the case of GIFs or scrolling through Tumblr on a smartphone during a lecture. Moving from mediums to modalities, the third and fourth segments analyzes the vastly disparate relations participants have to similar types of porn—i.e. distinct, idiosyncratic resonances and attachments—as well as immersions into and attachments to particular body parts, objects, and ephemera presented within porn—i.e. performers’ sweat, moaning, volume,

camera angles, animations, or inanimate objects. In the final section, I employ post-Web2.0 frameworks in order to open up discussions on the real limits of internet porn. That is, while pornography consumption reveals, and thereby ruptures, spaces from which to glean queer utopias—or as Muñoz (2009) articulates, pasts that possibly never were or futures perennially deferred—it cannot in and of itself articulate, or speak back to a heteronormative and capitalist biopower<sup>13</sup> that one, only capacitates the existence of queer digital spaces in as much as they generate capital and, two, *creates the need* for one to proclaim a sexual identity in order for the state to decide on its capacity to bear rights and its value.

In the conclusion, chapter 5 of this thesis, I make an argument toward specifics of heteronormative affects, beginning from 20<sup>th</sup> century historical roots, and how they capacitate and justify not only the racism and sexism apparent within some pornography but also the problematic relation many heterosexuals appear to have with porn. In addition, I situate “porn addiction”—that is how “addiction,” as measured by time spent on consumption, can be built upon gendered, raced, and classed privileges. Ultimately, I begin a discussion toward both the possibilities of pornography—qua affective exchanges, particularly among the nonnormative—and its concrete limits—internet porn as a control mechanism of progressive neoliberalism.

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<sup>13</sup> Expansively defined by Foucault as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for the” categorization, demarcation, subjugation, commodification, valuation, and medicalization of bodies and populations (1978, p. 140).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PORN WARS

#### FROM A POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY TO RESPECTABLY PERVERSE

##### THE ROOTS OF ANTIPORN

There is possibly no other quote that captures the fury, absolutism, and intense affective nature of past and contemporary anti-pornography stances than that of Robin Morgan in *Going too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*: “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice.” In the 1980s, Robin Morgan, along with Andrea Dworkin and other prominent, self-identified radical feminists, spearheaded an uprising against pornography—which they viewed as the consummation of capitalist patriarchy and misogyny. That view grew organically out of a second wave feminist movement composed in the majority of white middle-class women with strong allegiance to heteronormative principles such as the nuclear family and monogamy as well as the essentialist notion of a woman’s sexuality as dignified, romantic and, ultimately, domestic (Betty Dodson, 2013; Candida Royalle, 2013; Mireille-Miller Young, 2014). Concurrent with Robin Morgan and the Women Against Pornography (WAP) demonstrations, Catherine Mackinnon, a feminist legal scholar and friend/peer of Dworkin, endeavored to cruminate pornography from an academic and legal site. Later and current anti-pornography activists and academics proudly acknowledge their place in what they see as a linear genealogy of the anti-pornography movement’s epistemic positions beginning with Dworkin and Mackinnon. I am not an academic of this mold.

I start by reviewing the most prominent past and contemporary anti-pornographic literature while simultaneously identifying and problematizing the imperative frameworks and presuppositions at the root of the anti-pornographic stance. It is, of course, essential to identify and name those critical roots in order to highlight why a turn to affect proves far more generative. Using an affects analytics serves to undermine all hyperbolic claims about porn's—whether that be on the production side or consumer side—inherent deviance and/or social corrosion. Following that process, I also briefly review the nuanced/pro-pornographic literature within which this thesis finds its inspiration and place, while also illuminating the gaps in the literature that I, in both a primary endeavor and call for further development, hope to suture.

#### ANTIPORN: A POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

##### *Then: Violent Acts of Speech*

In the 1980s, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon attempted to outlaw pornography in coauthoring the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, claiming pornography to be an active system of women's subordination, dehumanization, and sexual objectification and, therefore, a violation of a woman's civil rights. While the ordinance succeeded in Indianapolis for a moment, the ordinance as a whole was struck down given pornography's protection under the free speech clause of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment (Katherine Jenkins, 2017). In order to convince the state that pornography should be outlawed, then, anti-pornography activists had to formulate an argument from a place of speech.

Drawing on J. L. Austin's theory of Speech Acts, Mackinnon and other academics asserted that pornography, in its legally recognized capacity as speech, engendered harm in the same way the law does, by having material effects on the objects and bodies over which it resides (Jenkins, 2017). Words, according to Austin, capacitate three distinct properties: locutionary—the sense and reference, or meaning, of words—illocutionary—having a force, as in the case of warning or ordering—and perlocutionary—bringing about substantive effects or changes, as in the case of being convinced of the warning (illocutionary) handed to you (1962, pp. 109-118). In this way, anti-pornography feminists could state that pornography, far from being mere fantasy, actually shapes desires and eroticizes hierarchies—i.e. through its perlocutionary property as speech (Mackinnon, 1993; Rae Langton, 1999, 2017). Arguments for or against Speech Act approaches are still occurring within academia today<sup>14</sup>.

At the height of the porn wars, Women Against Pornography (WAP)—founded by Morgan and Dworkin, among others—made an unfortunate alliance with the Christian Right and the Reagan Administration, which led to the “warping of feminist activism into a moral hygiene or public decency movement” (Constance Penley, et al. 2013, p. 10). This particular move instigated a passionate rebuttal from pro-pornography feminist activists, feminist academics, and porn performers who considered themselves either or both of the former. This group included academics like Carol Vance as well as porn performers like Annie Sprinkle and Candida Royalle. In this way, the porn wars engendered the binary discourse so many Americans are familiar with today—that is, porn as either violence or empowerment, and nothing in-between. Despite recognition of

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy*.

this bizarre dichotomy, there are today academics and activists alike who unabashedly categorize themselves on one side of the violence/empowerment binary, and this is mostly if not wholly found in the contemporary anti-pornography camp (Smith & Atwood, 2013).

*Now: Ending Violence, Preventing Addiction, and Saving the Children*

In the wake of the post-2000s internet and technology boom, with the nearly simultaneous introduction of smartphones, tablet, iPads, and online video streaming, the anti-pornography movement has been revitalized, finding its apex, I believe, in *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*, a children's book (recommended age 8) that takes an abstinence only approach to internet pornography. *Good Pictures Bad Pictures (GPBP)* is a #1 best seller in "Sexual Health Recovery" on Amazon<sup>15</sup> that has been hailed and recommended by at least two antiporn activists whom I discuss in this chapter, Matt Fradd, a best-selling Catholic author and public speaker, and Gary Wilson, chair of the National Education Breakthrough Programme for Raising Boys' Achievement in the UK. Fradd and Wilson are not the only contemporary antiporn activists, however, with some connection to this novel yet recycled abstinence outreach to children.

Gail Dines—to whom *GPBP* coauthor, Katherine A. Jensen, turns in her online article, "3 Things Your Kids Need to Know about Fifty Shades of Grey," published on the Protect Young Minds blog site—proudly continues the anti-pornography stance of

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<sup>15</sup> Out of the 493 reviews it has garnered (as of the writing of this paper), *GPBP* retains a 4.8/5 average rating.



Morgan, Mackinnon, Langton, and others. *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked Our Sexuality* stands as a sharp testament to that fact. Given the more than two decades of research on pornography, Dines (2010) begins her argument in rightly imploring readers to seriously consider pornography's ubiquity in the US. While explicit in her intention to draw a generalizable conclusion, Dines takes gonzo pornography—which Dines describes as porn with no real script or production value and little to no dialogue—as her main object of analysis. For Dines, gonzo stands as the consummation of all that is wrong with pornography: it is “body punishing” for the female performers and contains no discernible artistic atmosphere (p. 28). In fact, for Dines, gonzo is but extensional to other forms of pornographic sexual-subject making such as *Playboy*, *Girls Gone Wild*, and even *Sex and the City*. And in her chapter, “Grooming for Gonzo,” Dines argues that “in porn, sex is the vehicle by which men are rendered all powerful and women all powerless” (p. 63). Articulating the matter in even stronger terms, Dines later asserts that porn “creates a world that is at best inhospitable to women, and at worst dangerous to their well-being” (p.85). That, of course, is made possible through Dines attachment and application of—whether explicitly stated or not—porn as a speech act in which a kind of propositional transmission occurs between the image and the consumer that informs them of this world.

Not only does pornography engender harmful worlds for men and women alike, it also lacks a critical aspect of sex: “These men demonstrate zero empathy, respect, or love for the women they have sex with, no matter how uncomfortable or in pain these women look” (p. xxiv). That is to say, *love* is nowhere found within pornographic sex, when it ought to be. In that manner, *Pornland: How Pornography has Hijacked Our Sexuality* is

as much a title as it is a proposition—i.e. It is the case that pornography has stolen, or seized by force, an otherwise non-stolen, non-seized, original sexuality that is ours. And that sexuality is one of love and empathy. As Dine states, given that “no biological urge exists in a pure form, devoid of cultural meaning or expression” (p. xxii) pornography authors novel sexual scripts that diverge from what is natural. Ultimately, then, Dines draws one damning conclusion: If there is porn, there is no justice.

In the same vein as Dines, Robert Jensen views pornography as an institution in which gendered power is eroticized (2007; 2016). That is its always-end game. Also in line with Dines, for Jensen, pornography demonstrates a distortion of our naturally civil, empathic, and communal capacities. Jensen (2016) states, “we might balance a yearning for self-realization with the need for stable, respectful communities that make possible for individuals to fulfill their potential” (p. 1). People, particularly women, are rendered objects of abjection in pornography. For instance, in his reading of a pornographic film in which the male performer states, “I don’t fuck sluts. I jerk off on them” before ejaculating on her breasts, Jensen (2007) asserts that the action “suggests that ejaculating onto a woman is a method by which she is turned into a slut” (p. 69). That is, porn as a speech act puts into transmission something like “when you ejaculate onto a woman’s body she is rendered as less than.” This is not a question for Jensen who, arguing from experience, contends that “the power of pornography to shape how men view women is, in my experience, so powerful that it trumps the rational process by which I would try to resist it” (p. 113). Porn invariably distorts the ethical proclivities of the viewer, particularly those ethics concerning our bodies.

“Teach your children the names of body parts and the importance of honoring their bodies and the bodies of others through modesty and privacy” (Matt Fradd, 2017, p. 164). An openly Catholic popular speaker, Fradd, too, sees the private body as naturally and essentially core to one’s dignity. Continuing on the subject of one’s pedagogic duties, Fradd asserts that we need to “impress upon [our children] the goodness of sex when it is expressed with mutual love and affection” so that they can come to comprehend “the goodness of marital love” (p. 165). Again, like Dines and Jensen, love and sex are not mutually exclusive—at least, when it comes to instantiating their purest forms. Which is to assert, sex without love becomes something else altogether. Moreover, pornography is again rendered a distortion of our desire for sex, exploiting what is our basest and cruelest of animal capacities, which is why some men become addicted to it. And as with all addictions, pornography has the power to ruin lives: “Those entrenched in porn tend to live suffocatingly small lives, constantly looking for their next fix” (pp. 179-180).

Finally, we turn to Gary Wilson, a boys’ education activist in the UK whose work on the neurobiological effects of pornography, *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction*, while not published within academia, is certainly well referenced and prima facie justified through a Foreword written by Dr. Anthony Jack, Professor of Philosophy, Psychology, Neurology and Neuroscience at Case Western Reserve University. Importantly, Wilson (2014) claims that he is “not trying to start some kind of moral panic, or to say what is and isn’t ‘natural’ in human sexuality” (p. 8). Wilson’s intended intervention in—or, addition to—antiporn literature rests on relating porn consumption to internet addiction in general.

That is, according to Wilson, watching internet porn, surfing the internet in general, or “winning at online BINGO,” expresses a kind of “inexhaustible novelty” that induces a constant influx of dopamine, much like a number of narcotics (p. 60). Articulating the matter bluntly, Wilson states that “if you use internet porn, you may be training yourself ... to need the option of clicking to something more arousing at the least drop in you dopamine” (p. 69).

To best showcase how concrete and intense internet porn addiction can be, Wilson directs his main analysis to a Reddit thread called NoFap, a thread in which men who proclaim to have suffered or be suffering from porn addiction. For Wilson, one of the larger issues at hand, aside from impotence and anxiety, is two novel kinds of obsessive-compulsive disorder that the NoFap community coined itself: sexual-orientation obsessive-compulsive disorder (SOCD) and homosexual compulsive disorder (HOCD). While he does not state that such disorders ought to be immediately added to the next DSM, he does contend that they should be taken seriously. Again, in line with the antiporn literature already discussed, Wilson too perceives porn’s capacity to distort an otherwise already set in place, natural, and healthy sexuality.

### *My Critique: Toward Heteronormative Affects*

Here I want to make a few critiques of the literature just reviewed in order to excavate a few lines of argument which this thesis intends to destabilize and, in some cases, work through but toward different ends. This critique, then, will follow in the same order as the review given above. It is enough of a start for now to point out that all of the arguments above rest upon a particular reading of and *only* of hetero porn—apart from

Wilson, who does not necessarily analyze porn itself, as his is an argument on the parallels of (internet) porn addiction and all other addictive mediums and modalities.

To begin, Dines arguments rest upon a significant ambiguity and multiple unclear presuppositions. I will first tackle the ambiguity and its consequences. While Dines states in the preface that by “pornography” she means heterosexual, gonzo pornography. Nowhere else within the text does she demarcate that otherwise arbitrary referent. Even with a chapter titled “Grooming for Gonzo: Becoming a Man in a Porn Culture,” readers cannot be blamed for thinking that gonzo is but one object of analysis within the text. Due to consistent equivocation, then, there is no stability to what genre or mode of pornography (the industry? A pornographic artifact? A consumptive practice? Internet porn?) Dines means to refer at any time. Moreover, in using “body-punishing” as an adjectival augmentation of gonzo, Dines tacitly asserts that no woman (or man for that matter) experiences any pleasure out of rough sex and/or sex that is otherwise (or prima facie) impersonal. Here we can recall the introduction in which I discussed antiporn’s nascence originating out of a second wave feminist movement composed in the majority of white middle-class women with strong allegiance to heteronormative principles such as the nuclear family and monogamy as well as the essentialist notion of a woman’s sexuality as dignified, romantic and, ultimately, domestic. Dines, clearly, identifies by this restrictive and exclusive positionality. Through this overall insidious tactic, Dines’ pornography takes on a monolithic form. All the porn becomes one porn.

Regarding her presuppositions, the first entails that pornography can be read at face value. Since Dines makes very little ethnographic effort, she must admit to an assertion that visceral reactions to pornographic artifacts reveal truths. Second, “love”—

that which is apparently lacking in Dines' pornographic objects of analysis—is left undefined. Instead, readers are tacitly called to comprehend the word intuitively, somatically maybe. We are also called to accept how it preconditions a morally good kind of sex without proof of that connection (again, it's left to intuition, as granted). To be sure, heteronormativity conditions the love that Dines promotes<sup>16</sup>. This can be extracted from a final, and most problematic, presupposition: there is an original (or natural) sexuality that is ours.

As I stated already, *Pornland: How Pornography has Hijacked Our Sexuality* is as much a title as it is a proposition—i.e. It is the case that pornography has stolen, or seized by force, an otherwise non-stolen, non-seized, original sexuality that is ours. But *whose* sexuality is Dines talking about really? And what is the case for its untainted originality or purity? In Dines' (2010) own words, given that “no biological urge exists in a pure form, devoid of cultural meaning or expression,” pornography often authors our sexual scripts (p. xxii). This Foucauldian framing entails that there is *no original sexuality*—that culture largely produces sexualities. However, its negation underlies the largest premise of this book. Instead, Dines flatly promotes heterosexuality, monogamy, and reproduction as given natural states that porn destroys.

It is no coincidence that Jensen fails to—or, lacks a framework to—step back and view his own affective relation to the rather large amount of pornography he has analyzed throughout his career. Like Dines, by asserting what a certain pornographic scene means to him and thus must mean to all—through a propositional transmission, i.e. speech act—Jensen instantiates a highly manipulable and homogenized consumer, that convenient

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<sup>16</sup> This proposition is further explicated throughout this thesis.

ontological subject on which the speech act approach critically relies. Moreover, Jensen's reading of rough sex, or what ejaculating on a woman's body *ultimately means* privileges a heterosexist male perspective on the scene, wherein a woman's capacity to be a) turned on in the performance of a gendered derogative, b) turned on by having a man's ejaculate on her breasts, or c) neutral to the whole scenario is not a question of concern. Jensen's view on pornography is but a reflection to his *affective relation to it*. And this privileging of his experience rises to another level in stating:

I have experienced pleasure in my life. For me, pleasure has been a mixed bag. It feels good, but it often doesn't feel like enough. I have experienced joy in my life. For me, joy is pretty much always a good thing ... The pornographic culture is obsessed with pleasure, which is seductive. But it misses the essence of Baldwin's warning about the inability to love (p. 163).

We should ask: Why is it the case that because pleasure has never served a generative or educational purpose in Jensen's life that it must universally be the case? Jensen places a good/bad dichotomy upon joy and pleasure wherein no fluidity or intertwining can occur. Moreover, we are again called to naturalize the coupling of love and sex. Heteronormativity is universalized before argument. It is wise to take note of the affective power within heteronormativity. This is particularly the case with those who are religiously bound to it such as Matt Fradd.

While stating in the introduction to *The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography* that his is a non-religious response, the openly Catholic popular speaker certainly employs a narrative that—while consistent with Jensen in Dines in some respects—strongly recalls the Christian Right’s attack on pornography in the late 80s and early 90s, which lead to the “warping of feminist activism into a moral hygiene or public decency movement” (Penley, et al. 2013, p. 10). Moreover, when Fradd unabashedly asserts that “those entrenched in porn tend to live suffocatingly small lives, constantly looking for their next fix” (pp. 179-180), we must ask—as we are no doubt left to do—what consumers Fradd has himself interviewed or analyzed in order to become so absolutist about what is certainly an immensely complicated situation. That is, Fradd makes that statement with no evidence. It is meant as an affective maneuver.

Regarding Wilson (2014), it is not my aim at this juncture to argue the biological facts within his book—the function of neurotransmitters or how synapses occur, for example. What I find disturbing about Wilson’s book, surely a tacit mistake, is his constant equivocation on pornography—quite parallel to that of Dines, in fact, but with the added muddling of *the internet* itself as a source of addiction. The “inexhaustible novelty” that he often relegates to pornography is really a property of pornography in the modality of online pornography through the medium of the internet. That is, “inexhaustible novelty” is a property—not given to be an inherent problematic—capacitated within the internet itself—think Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, YouTube, Netflix. For instance, in his assertion that “if you use internet porn, you may be training yourself ... to need the option of clicking to something more arousing at the least drop in you dopamine” (p. 69)—his employment of “least” being



rather hyperbolic—the possible truth of the conditional still holds if we were to replace “internet porn” in the antecedent with “the internet.” It is not necessary to quote every passage in which a reader cannot be sure whether “porn” means internet porn<sup>17</sup> or the internet in general. It is important, however, to recognize the presumptions and ambiguities necessary to make this weak reductive approach to pornography appear significant and empirical.

My last contention with *Your Brain on Porn* emerges through the manner in which Wilson validates the normative anxieties within the NoFap threads he analyzes. Let me be clear in stating that I am not discounting testimonies of addiction and their effects in these men’s lives. Rather, I am problematizing a lack of knowledge of who these men are (race, class, religion, for instance) and Wilson’s uncritical engagement with SOCD and HOCD. The most disturbing example is found in a NoFap block quote, wherein a (Young? Old? White?) man openly discusses how much better his life has become thanks to a Xanax prescription and a newfound certainty that he is definitely straight, not gay or bi. One might wonder why this individual would be so worried about that in the first place. As in all works that regard pornography as a social ill, heteronormativity is never questioned.

What we have is ahistorical heteronormativity, as much a given as it is nominal. Mel Y. Chen’s (2012) framing of “toxic affect” is quite generative here; for, Dines and the rest tacitly, yet heavily, fastens heteronormativity with an “affective fabric of immunity nationalism” (p. 192). Monolithic pornography can be figured, then, as a toxin that has been introduced into an illusory pure system. But pornography, while it may

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<sup>17</sup> Not to mention which types—all porn becomes one porn

play a part in cultural production, also reveals something that is already here—heterogeneous forms of sex and sexuality. Thus, for antiporn scholars and activists, porn consumers must arbitrarily be marked a priori as naturally heteronormative and highly manipulable. In effect, illusions of the untouched, pure heteronormative system and the possible quarantining of pornography’s toxicity fixes the anxiety-inducing affect pornography has on the antiporn camp. It is my contention that all antiporn arguments are but a misdirection of affects—something to which I return in chapters 3 and 4.

Finally, my analysis of *GPBP* will be held off until my discussion of heteronormativity in chapter 5. For now, it is sufficient to note two sets of significant weaknesses in antiporn arguments: 1) methods—virtually all of the porn and porn consumers analyzed are hetero and there is a consistent heterosexist hermeneutic in which male perspectives on sex (pornographic or otherwise)<sup>18</sup> are held on a hierarchy of truth—and 2) the three frameworks/concepts underpinning antiporn feminism so far established—speech acts, heteronormativity, and the “new science” of addiction.

#### NUANCED/PROPORN: RESPECTABLY PERVERSE

At the same time that the second wave feminist movement was staking its claims on pornography and women’s autonomy, excluding lesbians and women of color in the process, a less public feminist movement by, namely, lesbians and women of color were staking oppositional claims on the same subjects. Keeping to pornography and its consumption, many of these scholars and activists (later categorized under “proporn”) challenged the tenets of gaze theory, which presumed and privileged a heterosexual male

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<sup>18</sup> I return to this point here when discussing *GPBP*’s formulation of boys as gatekeepers of sex.

perspective (Jonathan Markovitz, 2011). Moreover, departing from second wave feminists and thereby demonstrating a proto-third wave feminism, those women—queer, of color, or merely non-heteronormative in general—articulated the choice to work in porn or even consume porn (as a woman) as an exercise in one’s autonomy (Steven Seidman, 2015).

While retaining many of the core principles of early proporn feminism—women’s sexual autonomy and porn as a venue for sex education, for instance—contemporary work, sometimes labeled “anti-anti-pornography,” does not shy away from including critiques of pornography’s shortcomings<sup>19</sup>. For instance, “that the most readily available porn is basically entertainment for men” is a particular and significant shortcoming of contemporary pornography discussed by most proporn feminists (Betty Dodson, 2013, p. 30). That statement, however, is not to be confused with an absolute condemning of porn that appears to indulge in aggressive man/woman dominant/submissive binary, as longtime proporn feminist and ex-performer, Candida Royalle (2013), bluntly states, “I’m not calling for a softer, gentler porn. I like down and dirty sex as much as anyone” (p. 68). Rather, it acknowledges the fact that there is far less porn aimed at pleasing anyone who is not a White hetero cisman than porn aimed at pleasing presumably White hetero cismen. A fact borne out in the incessant closing of films with money shots, which “instructs the audience that the activity is over and has been successful” (Lisa Jean Moore, 2008, p. 79). If there is one thing that proporn feminists make clear: every kind

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<sup>19</sup> I will be employing “proporn” and/or “proporn feminism” as an umbrella for “nuanced” or “anti-anti” throughout the rest of this thesis.

of person consumes pornography at some point in their life, so why isn't there more porn aimed at those subjectivities?

A solution to the problem of pornographic diversity, if a bit precarious in its stability and promise<sup>20</sup>, has been and continues to be enabled through online culture. Both streaming and social networking sites such as XTube, YouPorn, or even Tumblr capacitate the uploading, downloading, and sharing of user-generated content—content simultaneously or divergently categorized as amateur, realcore, or do-it-yourself (DIY) that, in effect, destabilizes professional/amateur, producer/consumer, and porn/self-expression dichotomies (Sharif Mowlabocus, 2010; Feona Atwood, 2010). Concomitant with such modal transformations are changes in presentation, interrelation, narrative, and affect. User-generated porn, in whatever capacity, holds forth a promise of *truth* that commercial porn could not and cannot. What commercial hardcore fails to instantiate, “veracity of a [performer’s] erotic engagement, can instead be deduced from the circumstances surrounding the amateur performance, where it is known that the motive of the performer is sexual rather than financial” (Simon Hardy, 2009, p. 9). Of course, many amateur pornographers do in fact accrue capital, as in the case of webcam girls who charge by the hour for live streaming sessions. In other words, it provides space, at the least, for both candid performances and a level of sexual agency that is rather difficult to attain within commercial venues. And while *prima facie* all of that appears significantly liberating, it does not inherently escape macro systemic or discursive regulation and marginalization of queer and/or non-White users. Consumers visiting any of the sites mentioned, the largest streaming sites, still have to spend some time digging for porn that

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<sup>20</sup> I return to this in Ch. 4.

breaks from normative—read: offensive to many—gender, race, or sexual representations (Jennifer Moorman, 2010). Additionally, “the impact of new media in closing the gap between reality and representation is surely neither inherently liberating nor oppressive” (Hardy, 2009, p. 15), if not merely for the fact that it still operates under a capitalist framework wherein websites manage procedures of fantasy supply and maintenance in promising and often delivering to consumers a sense of control over, and choice of, what amateur performers do/upload (Mowlabocus, 2010). So, while proporn academics like Brian McNair (2013) propose that capitalism “appears to be the optimal mode of production for the generation not only of economic wealth and cultural liberalism, but of sexual equality and progress” (p. 7)—in many ways as a direct effect of pornography, he argues—capitalism<sup>21</sup>, in as much as it opens up space, also aggressively delimits the range of its intersubjective and affective capacities. That is, streaming and social network technologies strongly demonstrate, as I argue in chapters 4 and 5, Lauren Berlant’s (2010) objects of cruel optimism in the way such technologies engender “shifts in affective atmosphere”—dependent as they are on the stability of their hardware and open access to their networks—which “are not equal to changing the world” (p. 116).

At the same time that proporn activists and academics are working toward an expansion of representations and choices within pornography, still others endeavor to better understand the porn world as it stands, particularly in regards to the intersectional characteristics that heavily inflect the representation, presentation, labor, pleasure,

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<sup>21</sup> I find it unfortunate that McNair conflates capitalism with the ostensibly liberating technologies produced under capitalism—surely, a kind of is/ought fallacy, a la David Hume.

message, and *intake*<sup>22</sup>. For example, Mireille Miller-Young (2014) employs a framework of her own design, “illicit eroticism,” in order to highlight the dynamical processes through which porn performers—black women performers and directors, in particular—rehearse, reshape, and challenge normative discourses about their sexuality as inflected by both race and gender. Roderick A. Ferguson (2004) implores us to recognize how the citizen (the “good” citizen) engendered through hegemonic discourses within the US “is a racialized emblem of heteronormativity whose universality exists at the expense of particularities of race, gender, and sexuality” (p. 12). Never forgetting how such normative functions funnel into pornography as an industry skewed toward White middle-and-upper-class imaginaries<sup>23</sup>, illicit eroticism discerns how black women performers and directors, and others as well, “intervene in the realm of *representation* ... use erotic performance as an opportunity to have new sexual experiences” and use their sexual capital to generate a kind of life in which they have the means to control who says and does what with their bodies, their labor, their agency (Miller-Young, 2014, p. 266). I see her ethnographic work as a consummate execution of hermeneutical justice (a facet of epistemic justice). Hermeneutical justice succeeds, according to Miranda Fricker (2007), when it neutralizes “the impact of structural identity prejudice on one’s credibility judgment” (p. 173). Testimonies by sex laborers have historically been silenced, lest they align with normative discourses about their ill and corrosive properties. Sexuality not standing alone without inflection from race and gender, black and queer sex workers have

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<sup>22</sup> I emphasize “intake” given my singular concern with consumers in this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> That the highest paid/grossing performers (for both men and women) and producers are White is not a fact to be overlooked in the face of other ostensible power dynamics with which antiporn feminist concern themselves.

had even less opportunity or success in being heard. It is time for everyone to listen: “one person’s fantasy is another person’s work, and the workers have fantasies of their own” (Miller-Young, 2013, p. 118). With the same fidelity to epistemic justice and intersectionality, Ariane Cruz, in *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*, also illuminates and engages with the less visible—under normative lenses—agential, transgressive and exploratory capacities of black women performers within BDSM and race-based pornography. More than liberating black women from a politics of respectability, Cruz demonstrates the interrelations of chattel slavery, still alive and well in the US imaginary<sup>24</sup>, with the accoutrements and devices within BDSM. Additionally, using her unique “politics of perversion” framework, Cruz (2016) further articulates how women can be active agents of violence and domination, queering what is said to be “normal” about women’s pleasure—to speak the unspeakable and come to terms with the “constitutive interplay of race, pleasure, trauma, and abjection” of black women’s sexuality (p. 21). Just as “it does not make sense to understand white female subjectivity in abstraction from race” (Gloria Wekker, 2016, p. 106), race understood as an historical construction with vast material ripples through time, an account of black women’s subjectivity and sexuality invariably requires comprehension of the historical landscape through which and upon which black subject positions are felt and performed—in other words, lived. Porn does not take a back seat to this reality. If Ariane Cruz is correct, BDSM and porn in fact capacitate the highest generative spaces for simultaneously doing and undoing the anxieties and paradoxes within race. While

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<sup>24</sup> *12 Years and Slave* and *Django* unleashed are but a couple of the examples of its liveliness in contemporary US that Cruz references.

porn and BDSM “highlight the function of race as an eroticized technology of domination” (p. 99), they also brilliantly highlight the limited repertoire within which race narratives find sustainment. Where Dines (2006) sees a hardly concealed minstrel show upheld by constant repetition and rehearsal, Cruz sees that for black women performers, “as postslavery subjects with no conventional memory of slavery, these insistent returns might become not an attempt at rememory, but a kind of forgetting” (2016, p. 220). Both Miller-Young’s and Cruz’s analytics work to undo the dimming and shackling narratives of heterosexism and antiporn feminism as they have ranged over a number of bodies.

Commercial and more or less amateur queer pornography by or involving men has also become an object of analysis for nuanced/proporn research. For instance, while academics such as Richard Fung (1991) and David Eng (2001) discuss both the race-based feminization (read: abjection and humiliation) of male Asian performers as based on the gender binary constructed under heteropatriarchal hegemony as well as the simultaneous near-complete absence of Asian tops in either hetero or queer pornography—undoubtedly important analyses—Nguyen Tan Hoang (2014) works through such critiques to clarify how projects based on the remasculinization of Asian manhood and sexuality only works to enforce that gendered binary. Rather, says Hoang, we can reread the pleasure in being a bottom as a form of joy, a kind of nonnormative agency—an affective, aesthetic, and sexual position—while at the same time we critique pornographic white and masculinist supremacy. Hoang calls for, among other things, the production of counterpornographies. Such has been undertaken by producers such as Paul Morris—of the highly controversial Treasure Island Media—in regards to



seroconverted gay men having bareback sex, a utopianism that Morris asserts “argues for better conditions for the body ... and, more importantly ‘fun,’ which I read as social creative chaos—the necessary chaos of queerness” (Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen, 2014, p. 236). However, even in such pornography, it does not follow that race (as it inflects gender and sexuality) is or will also be reimagined or overcome.

Pornography has historically played and continues to play a large role in the work of cultural demarcations, of what is properly cultural and what ought to be regulated, as well as making work of those regulations, turning taboos and censorship on its head in a myriad of ways and revealing in the process that pornography, depending on the context, capacitates a number of functions, none of which can be said to be inherent or self-evident (Walter Kendrick, 1987; Linda Williams, 1989). The internet has only exacerbated this capacity. As “an assemblage of factors and actors that cut through and build onto one another” (Susanna Paasonen, 2011, p. 12), internet pornography remains an understudied, in as much as it is ill-understood, abundant resource of cultural critique, production, and reproduction. In its massive entanglements, internet porn attains what Sarah Ahmed (2010) would call an “affective life”: expanding and circulating, by necessity through exchanges inside and outside of material and abstract capital. It eludes intuitions and moralizing. And while even proporn academics find as much disagreement as they do continuity with each other’s analyses<sup>25</sup>, their conflicts more often than not generate fruitful interventions, augmentations, or calls for further analysis. I endeavor

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Paasonen (2011) finds “the notion of gendered structure of desire rather nonsensical in its attachment to binary notion of difference (male and female) that grants no fluidity within the categories” (60). Cruz’s (2016) analysis, however, demonstrates an iterative and processual structure of desire heavily inflected, without necessarily being static, by gender-race entanglements. We cannot escape history; nor can we forget the inseparability of race, class, sexuality, and gender.

here to answer the call regarding a facet of pornography thus far lacking in research by  
proporn academics: the audience.

CHAPTER 3  
FROM WHENCE WE CAME  
ON PARTICIPANT ANGLE OF ARRIVAL

WHO WE ARE

In the introduction, I pulled from Sarah Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Shaka McGlotten, and Jaqueline M. Martinez to articulate how affects circulate and have been in circulation at the micro level—interpersonal and intrapersonal—as well as macro level—national discourses mediated through television, film, radio, and magazines—before the subject’s encounter with or interpretation of them. Hegemonic discourses being the vehicle for state and capitalist ideologies, whose power is capacitated through affect, while ranging over all subjects, takes on disparate effects depending on a subject’s relations to power as well as what they have gleaned from family and kinship group behaviors and discourses. To understand my participants’ divergent relations to power and family, as well as what manner each subject buys into or modulates their own desires and affective labors according to that relation, it is essential to have participants articulate who they are and where they come from. In this chapter, then, I gather participants’ positionality through their own narratives. Second, I note the differences between those participants more proximal to heteronormative ideologies and those less proximal. Through an intersectional lens, I begin to parse out how race inflects not only what proximity to heteronormativity feels like, but also how both heterosexuality and queerness are not mutually exclusive nor stable. Lastly, as part of my smaller intention to undermine antiporn moral panics, I highlight how my participants’ relation to internet porn is in

constant flux, modulated by knowledge and age, and approached through multiple competing discourses which the participant plays an agential role in balancing. Out of 8 total participants for this study, all but one, Ricky, provided me with life history information during one-on-one interviews. Ricky's history, then, as short as it appears here, was gathered indirectly from the transcripts of the focus group in which he fully participated. Furthermore, all participant names are pseudonyms provided by participants themselves and, thereby, may involve references to popular fictional characters.

*Rob (he/him)*

From how strong religious views are in my life, um, how do I say this... I knew a lot of people who once were gay at some point in their lives but now are straight.

The son of a professor at ASU and a proud Christian who at the time of our dialogic interview is halfway through the first gender studies class he has ever taken, Rob speaks candidly about the ways he balances his education against or with his religious and, by extension, ontological and ethical views. Cisgender, White, and 22 years young, he speaks of genuine excitement in regards to learning about what he has otherwise never confronted—what he otherwise would certainly not confront in his mathematics major:

I had always kinda thought, *okay yea I know there are straight people, there are gay people, there are lesbians*, but I never really realized that it's not set in stone. There's a fluidity to it.

While it seems as if Rob contradicts himself—in first alluding to a belief in homosexuality being a choice or a phase, then nearly asserting a newfound comprehension of fluidity—it is clear that Rob is in the midst of rethinking his beliefs, and trying to do so without necessarily undermining his familial values and religious beliefs. He is firmly agential in his balancing of new knowledges. As a young white Christian man of middle-class upbringing, it is a difficulty for him to imagine the legibility of other lives without explanation, which is not something particular to Rob; nor does it necessarily bear on whether he is a good person or not. It is, rather, reflective of the privileges of a majoritarian positionality in general to be able to take one's own positionality for granted, while simultaneously feeling that to require an explanation of that of others, in order that they become legible and legitimate, is invariably rational and justifiable.

Rob does not recall when or in what medium his first encounter with pornography occurred, but he began to consume it regularly at the age of 16. The very first video he can recall—seen on a streaming site—was in the amateur genre. In fact, Rob only consumes amateur pornography that looks and feels homemade and as proximal as possible to what he imagines real *heterosexual* sex looks and sounds like.<sup>26</sup>

Rob confesses to having consumed porn at a problematic frequency during this time. At its peak, he felt his porn consumption was directly related to a daily anxiety, particularly around women. Surprisingly, Rob dissociated his frequency of use from porn. That is, he never thought it was the porn in and of itself that was making him

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<sup>26</sup> This is further explored in Chapter 4.

anxious or melancholic. It was his frequency. Thus, after a few weeks of weening, reaching a consistent frequency of 1-2 times per week, and noticing the daily anxiety and anxiousness around women had faded, Rob settled with his relationship to porn, able to speak about it through religious allegory even:

If you look in the Bible, with Adam and Eve in the garden, before they sinned, they were completely naked. And after they sinned they felt they had to clothe themselves. The reason that distinction is so important to me is not that I think we should all walk around naked. But, lustfully looking at someone has *nothing*<sup>27</sup> to do with what a women wears. That's victim blaming. It starts with you.

Equally important within this contextualizing of Rob's relationship to porn is the fact that Rob is a virgin who is waiting till marriage. Porn, for Rob, is a mediator for sex. Yet, it is also important to point out how his proximity to heteronormativity—in wanting marriage and presuming monogamy, as well as being white and middle class—eases his relationship to porn. The porn he consumes not only expresses the heteroromantic futurity he desires, but also an already normative version of desire itself. That is, aside from worrying about frequency, and avoiding porn that is not amateur, porn consumption is a fairly straightforward affair for Rob.

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<sup>27</sup> His emphasis.

*Mike (he/him)*

My family was fairly liberal ... I always identified as, you know, Democrat in that I should use my privilege, my access to resources, to help other people.

Raised in a home with parents who identified as Catholic even though they did not attend mass, having decided the church was too conservative in values, Mike addresses each topic of our discussion with a keen awareness of the political stakes involved. Moreover, as a white, bisexual transman in their 19<sup>th</sup> year on this earth, Mike's lived experience has taught him to value alterity and to continually educate himself about gender, sexuality and race. For instance, after being educated in the social construction of gender, of *manness* specifically, accepting that one can be a man with a uterus and/or without a penis, Mike believes that his own choice to one day undergo anatomical and hormonal transitioning does not entail a claim to being a real man while pre-op transmen or men who remain anatomically female remain illegitimate and illegible. In fact, Mike, at the time of our interview, was pre-op and comfortably so. Overall, Mike shows that while cognizant of his nonnormative position as a transman, he benefits from the many privileges of whiteness.

Returning to Mike's familial and personal values—noting that values clash, exchange, deepen, or fade away throughout a lifetime—Mike began experimenting with religions outside of Catholicism when he was 17 years old due to a surviving, resonating

religious sense. In time, Mike soon came to identify with Judaism, particularly for the way Judaism conceptualizes god's love:

Christianity's more focused on you doing things to sort of say that you're worthy of god's love, whereas Judaism is sort of you doing what's good for others and yourself. Just do that and god appreciates it. So, it's for yourself and yet in the end for god.

In the Midwestern State where Mike grew up—but did not want to name—anti-Semitism was explicit, boiling over in a massacre at a local synagogue. That being the case, Mike postponed exploring Judaism and its different sects more openly till moving to Arizona. He is currently working towards the conversion process.

Lastly, Mike first encountered porn, he thinks, around the age of 13. At the time, Mike tells me, he developed many creative though well off the mark reasons why such a thing would exist. A matured and nuanced epiphanic moment occurred at the hormonally active age of 16 when, as he put it, “you get that sexual awakening and you're like, *oh*. Everything starts fitting into place.” For Mike, without a doubt in his mind, pornography played a significant if not primary role in coming to terms with his trans identity.

Thus, unlike Rob's rather straightforward relation, what porn consumption accomplishes or means for Mike has been in flux in as much as Mike's own subject formation. As a queer individual who himself has undergone many important changes in only the last couple of years, Mike also understands that porn emerges out of and caters to a multiplicity of desires and positionalities. However, he cannot help but feel an



ambivalence toward commercial pornography as a venue for white cismen to take part in fetishization.

*Peter (they/them)*

I grew up in a very heteronormative family. Like, my father told me he would still love me if I murdered somebody but that, quote, I would “never be a fag.” And I was like, *damn that’s really heavy to put on a 12 year old.* But whatever.

Though Peter’s family had instilled a “very black and white” framework of the world into Peter, their (Peter) experiences led them to adopt a new one. Peter now, at 21 years old, identifies as a moral relativist. As they understand it, any matter in the world needs—“deserves” being the particular word they employ—to be analyzed through the context within which it occurs or is situated. It was not so easy an exchange, however:

I was very heteronormative. With my first girlfriend, I was like, “I don’t think I could handle my son being gay. Like, what if I walked in on him sucking someone’s dick?” And she was like, “What if you walked in and your daughter was sucking dick?” And I was like, “Damn. You’re right!” And that completely changed my view. That’s like what spurred my self-discovery.

This self that Peter began discovering is their non-binary gender and queer sexuality. As is often the case, Peter's gender dysphoria was a powerful and difficult hurdle.

I really started to struggle with it my senior year. I was like, *I don't think I'm a guy*. And I didn't really accept the idea of non-binary. I thought maybe I wanted to be a woman ... Then I joined the military and was like, [sarcastically] "Oh, I've never thought about maybe I was born in the wrong body." And then I got out of the military because of an attempted suicide. It's whatever. It's part of my life.

Upon returning from the military, Peter began to present feminine, trying in fact to pass as a woman. This got them kicked out of their house because their parents did not want their siblings to be affected, something which Peter spoke about with an understanding and empathy that was not reciprocated from their family to them. Peter's exclusion from the family—as predicated on his distance from normative gender—reveals how heteronormativity-as-hegemony places certain subjects in the cruel position of having to perform an inauthentic self in order to take part in the exchange of or even be on the receiving end of happy familial affects. In this way, too, we see both a glimpse of heteronormativity as an affective landscape that preordains Peter as exceptional to its flows, and heteronormative affects as not happy in and of themselves when they resonate in a subject as an alien force.

It was only in the last couple of years that Peter discovered how they did not fit into either side of the normative gender binary. They currently present quite masculine,

sporting a trim blonde beard, short bedhead hair, and men's apparel. As they note, however, were it not for the 3 cats, a dog, a relationship and the 19 credits—as a double major in anthropology and psychology—they are taking at ASU:

I would present feminine if I could, but like... mostly androgynous. Like, I don't wish I had a vagina, but I wish I had breasts and, like, not a penis, just because like... boobs would be good.

Again, Peter expresses a desire to perform and present disparately, but is unable to do so due to other normative constraints on students caught up in the neoliberal college rat race, something which Peter may feel more strongly in his desire to understand sociogenesis.

Like many who grew up in a household with the technical means, Peter first encountered porn at a prepubescent age: 10 years old, they believe. Also in line with the participants introduced thus far, Peter did not begin seeking out porn until they had reached puberty. While Peter's porn consumption has varied and diverged greatly in the time since they began to seek it out on their own, Peter stands by at least one firm belief in regard to porn consumption:

People need to support non-binary, independent artists. A lot of the time when you see it, it either fetishizes trans people or it's like "man cums all over teenage girl." There's other things. Most porn just feels too

derogatory in my opinion. That's a reason why I don't watch [commercial] porn. Their titles are too derogatory.<sup>28</sup>

Much like Mike, Peter cannot consume commercial porn that appears to fetishize otherness, particularly that of a trans body. And unlike Rob, Peter makes sure to vocalize their felt understanding of how representation can hurt. This is not to say that Rob has no idea of that fact. That he did not find it necessary to add as part of his narrative reveals how a nationally privileged positionality does not often suffer from constant, national ill-representation and, thereby, can have trouble understanding the importance of representation in general. It does not mean, however, that someone like Rob is inherently or actually obtuse or oppressive.

*Meseeks (he/him)*

People who have their own sexual practices obviously have their own reasons, their own backgrounds to why they do what they do, or maybe they don't and that's just what gets them off. But, you know, I totally respect it and I try not to judge or jump to any conclusions. Cuz, I'd very much like to understand their perspective rather than reducing them to that [\*finger quoting] "weird" identity.

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<sup>28</sup> Discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

Meseeks, like Rob, is both heterosexual, with a fixed sense of it, and currently taking his first gender studies course. A 22-year-old, 1<sup>st</sup> generation Hispanic, Meseeks appears to be grappling with an instilled sense of heterosexuality as natural (Why state “people who have *their own* sexual practices” as if we don’t all have our own sexual practices?) and his newfound knowledge that places heterosexuality’s naturalness into question (Seen in the way he pantomimes quotations over “weird identity” that people could be reduced to). As a point of possible explanation, when I asked for Meseek’s demographic information at the beginning of our interview, he articulated his race as: “American. Well, Hispanic or Mexican, but, you know, American.” Confused at first by this response, I came to realize throughout the interview that by “American” Meseeks was referring to his proximity to that identification—understood here as a cultural familiarity and affectivity—as opposed to “Mexican.” If we understand American as tacitly denoting whiteness, and whiteness as coconstructed with heteronormativity<sup>29</sup>, we gain an understanding as to why Meseeks’ narrative reflects a need (or a pressure) to express his heterosexuality in such a manner. That is, it is a case of affect alignment that he as a cisman ought to consummate. Though, as I discuss further on, he has also come to understand the discursive barriers his brownness engenders between him and normativity.

Just about to graduate with a BS in life sciences, Meseeks plans to continue on to graduate school in order to one day take part in policy making around the environment. And though he is a science-minded atheist today, Meseeks grew up a Catholic, the only boy of 4 children. Having 3 sisters, he notes his awareness of particular stigmatizations that women undergo during or before sex such as the pressure to say “yes.” Unfortunately,

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<sup>29</sup> Which I discuss in detail in chapter 5.

Meseeks recalls, having 3 sisters also meant being “heavily stigmatized” for consuming porn. He had to play a careful balance between his adopted and accepted familial values regarding women’s oppression against a view from his family that porn may be antithetical to such an ethic.

A cousin or a close friend his age, Meseeks can’t remember, first introduced porn to Meseeks when he was 10. Like all other participants in this study, he did not begin seeking porn until puberty, around the age of 14. Meseeks confesses to having had at that time what he regards as an addiction to porn. After getting a virus on the house computer, however, and after the heavy stigmatizing that followed, Meseeks attained a distaste for porn. As he remembers, “I was kinda disgusted with myself.” Not wanting to be excluded from another hegemonic narrative around porn as violence, Meseeks actually felt within himself a type of violation, an affect which he relates to disgust. However, after many discussions with high school friends and overhearing other students’ conversations during lunch, Meseeks began believing that nearly everybody used porn. He began to *feel* normality. In particular, “it was me hearing people talking about porn and having no shame in saying it” that led him to let go of an idea of himself as “weird and crummy.”

*Alphonse (he/him)*

I was trying to recreate this image in my mind of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish teacher. She was like perhaps the first individual in my life who, I dunno, who like really seemed as if they cared about me. She seemed really... motherly to me. Sort of caring and... sexual at the same time.

According to Alphonse, a 22-year-old, heterosexual black man, his was not a happy childhood. He suggest that moving around a lot in his youth was very hard on him and his brother, but does not share anything more specific regarding why he recalls his childhood as unhappy.

Though his parents were/are very conservative Muslims, Alphonse cannot recall ever fully adopting the faith, feeling agnostic at best in his youth. At a certain point, he believed that ethics and morality did not really exist at all. And by the time he was in his teens he accepted a kind of nihilism. Nihilism, according to Alphonse, was turning him into a bitter human being, an additional weight to his unhappiness. Not willing to live that way, he began to practice more compassion. And though he has not adopted a religion, Alphonse does admit to attaining a sense of spirituality. In particular:

I no longer think nihilistically. It's all circumstantial. Things depends on the context. Humans have a freewill and all of one's actions should be such that they avoid prohibiting the freewill of others. Yea, so, I believe in freewill.

With the framework in mind, Alphonse is cognizant of the idea that freewill is not always a given. And this shows up in the ill affective resonances that he sometimes experiences in consuming porn in particular circumstances.

Alphonse encountered porn the latest of all participants, at the age of 16, when a friend showed him a porn site on his phone. He confesses to having

known about porn before that time, but he never really thought about being able to access it on his phone. Though Alphonse believes that he has a healthy frequency of use today, he has always been rather troubled about his own ethical views regarding porn itself (rather than frequency of use as is the case in some of my other participants). That has only been exacerbated since beginning a relationship with a young woman—a young woman Alphonse is quite taken with and has been dating for a year—who does not believe in sex before marriage, believes that men who use porn are creeps and, most agonizingly for Alphonse, believes that he has not and would never use porn. Given that fact, proximity to his girlfriend instantiates an affective atmosphere under which Alphonse feels ill using porn, in his own words, “like a bad person.” Alphonse had trouble articulating exactly all the reasons this was the case given he does not feel the same outside of that context. But that’s just the trouble with affect. It is also part and parcel with balancing heteronormativity’s stipulations on proper objects of desire with one’s subjective views. That is, given heteronormativity-as-hegemony’s capacity to appear natural, or best, or healthy, Alphonse already experiences a kind of moral sickness in even beginning a discussion on porn consumption with a significant other.

*Buhrairai (he/him)*

You know, my girlfriend really changed a lot for me. She’s like this hardworking person, doing really well in school and all of that. Like, the crazy sex, that’s just a fun aspect of the whole thing. Of all the things



she's got going on, the sex is just this awesome bonus we get to have. Just one of many.

Having grown up in a strongly religious household with parents who took an abstinence approach to the taboos respective to their values—sex before marriage, drugs, and porn—Buhairai developed a fairly significant sense of shame and silence around his desires and porn. As he indicates above, however, external forces—the internet, friends, and his girlfriend in particular—relieved him that old shell. As I further discuss in chapter 4, Buhairai believes that the anxiety imbued into porn through his parents and the sense of discovery produced through his girlfriend's candid approach to rough porn and BDSM play the largest roles in what within certain porn and what of porn consumption moves him and resonates within him the most.

Buhairai is quick to note that, despite certain limiting religious views, his parents raised him to think of academics as a number one priority in life. And at 19 years old, this young Hispanic cisman has become a rather articulate and confident individual. No longer religious, Buhairai informs me of how he has come to adopt pluralism:

In the sense that there's more than one right answer and it can change depending on things. I used to be a relativist but I thought that was too narrowing. It didn't allow for personal beliefs to continue through. A lot of people try to go the Utilitarian route, but there's too many flaws in that. Like, I think Aristotle was pretty on point. As long as nobody is getting

hurt, that's good; if they are receiving benefits, even better; but, each situation needs to be looked at cases by case.

A seeker of truths, even in its multiple forms, Buhairai retains an empirical lens over health, however. He is currently majoring in biomedical sciences in order to become an internal medicine doctor. While not obvious, this career choice stems from personal experiences in his life:

My mother relied mostly on home remedies. I was diagnosed with ADHD and given a free trial of this medicine that worked really well for me, but my mother never got me on that and it could've helped me. I just thought that it's better to deal with people professionally than allow them to handle it on their own.

In line with other participants, while Buhairai first encountered porn at the prepubescent age of 11, he did not begin to intentionally explore porn until 14, when in the throes of puberty. Even then, he was not exactly sure what would resonate with him. Navigating commercial sites, as heterosexuals are more likely to do, Buhairai found himself initially attached to large breasted, blonde porn star: "I don't know why but it was like all about big boobs, hahaha! I mean, I was what? 14? I didn't know what was going on." Though it was the case that Buhairai aligned his desires to normative pornographic objects at an age where he essentially knew no better, he soon made an agential turn, being the nascent sexual subject he was, toward genres of pornography that resonated with a particular

intensity that commercial porn did not offer him. That is, even if we grant commercial porn the power of speech acts, Buhairai ignored their world-promise regardless.

*Johto (he/him)*

Personally, I have a very left-leaning view of the world. I'm okay talking about gender identity, talking about there being a non-binary system [...]  
And I would definitely say I have a more human approach to everything.  
It's like my approach to drug policy—it's more people oriented. Same thing goes with social movements: it needs to be more people oriented for the sake of, you know, people.

Though he did not specify his major, Johto is clearly passionate about policy issues—“on a global scale,” he specifies—around drugs. He is passionate about all the issues we discuss, in fact. Bisexual, White, and 21 years old, Johto's affect is as passionate as it is confident. In the previous chapter, I discussed how my methods included briefly going over the porn wars, past and present, with my participants, and the reasons for doing so. Johto, to my surprise, was fairly educated on the subject, finishing certain facts or concepts I was halfway to completely outlining. In fact, a week before our interview, Johto attended a panel on the interrelations of low socio-economic status and sex work, an ex-sex worker being one of the panelists. And I bring this up for two important reasons: one, as will be discussed further in chapter 4, Johto is comfortable consuming hetero, gay, bi, and queer porn from both amateur and commercial genres; two, Johto demonstrates, as all participants do in differing degrees, the multifaceted and agential

nature of a consumer's affective relationship to porn as modulated by their knowledge and life courses. While, he identified "solely as gay" in high school, after entering college, in "being surrounded by all these beautiful people in close proximity," Johto quickly began to view himself as a bisexual—what he still identifies as today. The erotic affective atmosphere of college life was so strong as to redirect Johto's desires towards new possibilities. Possibilities he willingly opened up to through his still burgeoning yet fluid sense of desire and was enabled to explore through internet porn.

Johto's first encounter with pornography occurred at the age of 14. Though his parents had a computer in the house, he was not allowed to use it until high school, when he needed it for projects in school or work. Already hormonal and "genetically wired to look for sex," as Johto states, his exploration of porn began right away. Johto, as all participants, relay idiosyncratic narratives regarding their sex drives and object choices. And as I explore in chapter 4, Johto's whiteness—and his cognizance of what that means in regards to privilege—plays a major role.

*Ricky (he/him)*

To me, in my family, [masturbation] has never been a topic of shame. My mom had a talk with me one day. She was like, you know, this is how it goes down. And I remember ... that first orgasm. Cuz for me, I was like trying hard before it happened, like, *why doesn't it work!* Cuz I was watching porn long before I was able to orgasm.

Ricky was born in Cuba but does not share with the focus group when he came to the US. He speaks fluent English with hardly a trace of an accent. He and Meseeks are close friends and the same age, 22. And like Meseeks, Ricky is vocal about his rather strict sense of heterosexuality, at least in regards to the kind of porn he consumes. Ricky, too, thanks to Meeseeks, has become aware of raced and gendered sexuality discourses on the supposed hypersexual Latino. Ricky, however, does not shy away from that possibility. Meaning, he intimates that it is a script through which he functions, whether that be in a distancing manner or the manner he has chosen, as legitimating of his relation to pornography.

#### NAVIGATING UNDER HETERONORMATIVITY

First, while it makes little sense to categorize and name *a kind* of angle for each case, it is enough to have highlighted how the ubiquity of heteronormative affects are felt and navigated differently according to participants' proximity to whiteness, cognizance of whiteness as enabling of multiple privileges, gender performance, and fluctuating objects of desire. Thus, while queer as opposed to heteronormativity remain two significant analytics, they are additionally inflected by race. And though these analytics are employed throughout the following chapter, a further and necessary explication of their components and consequences, particularly those of whiteness, are relegated to chapter 5.

Second, all participants' histories demonstrate a simultaneous, ongoing process of learning and unlearning mapped by normative discourses on sexuality—that process framed but not fixed by how close or far a participant approximates their alignment to the ideologies therein—as well as interpersonal suggestion, legitimation, and inspiration.

Moreover, depending on normative proximity, participants reveal divergent experiences of online social networking—that is, what networks actualize their sense of the social. While not fully apparent within the glimpses of their lives provided here, in the next chapter, I further explore how affective differentials within hetero and queer spaces, online or otherwise, often delineate when and where certain knowledges about sex and desire can be taken for granted or deserving of further investigation. For instance, how the participants deals with a pornographic encounter that is initially disturbing, gross, confusing, or questionably ethical.

Lastly, all participants who encountered porn at a prepubescent age did not begin to seek out porn until puberty. That too will be discussed in chapter 5, where I tackle *GPBP*, the myth of White childhood innocence, the conceptualization of middle-class boys as the gatekeepers of women's sex (especially women of color) and how all of those are capacitated through the widespread normative affects everyday subjects must navigate through due to the nationalization of heteronormativity.

## CHAPTER 4

### BE.COM/ING

#### ADDICTS AND CREEPS? OR, EVERDAY AFFECTIVE SUBJECTS?

We are moved by things. In being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location ... and the timing of its appearance ... To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object.

—Sarah Ahmed, 2010, p. 25

#### THE FLUX OF AFFECTS

If pornography does not inspire, disgust, or titillate through propositional modes of transmission, as I have been arguing, then a bodily and preconscious modality must be doing the work. That bodily modality is affect. But what exactly is an affect? Is there only one kind of affect? More importantly, how does a consumer's subjective relation to pornography work through/with affects? In this chapter, I first clarify what affects are as well as define frameworks of multimodal erotic affects. I then apply those frameworks to participant porn consumption narratives in order to illuminate the agential capacity participants employ in their idiosyncratic relations to porn.

It would be a mistake to imagine affect as only given off by agents. In chapter 3, I introduced Sarah Ahmed's formulation of feeling—that is, affect—as always already in distribution, exchange, or circulation. Ahmed (2010) begins her understanding of affective flows by first categorizing and opposing an “in-out” formulation of affect from

an “out-in.” The former case suggests that affect is an experience *from in here to out there*; where the latter suggests an experience *from out there to in here*. Surely, Ahmed proposes, affect occurs as a dialectic. It is both/and. In agreeance with Ahmed (2014), I think it is less important to intellectualize affect than to seriously consider what affect *does* now that we have recognized its perennial flows within our everyday engagements and routines. That being said, I conceptualize affect as a preconscious or presubjective<sup>30</sup> potentiality with the capacity to be directed or redirected in a rational manner (Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Greg, 2010; Lauren Berlant, 2011 Shaka McGlotten, 2013). I find this a necessary determination for escaping two pitfalls highlighted by Clare Hemmings (2005): 1) if fully subsumed in the preconscious, as it would be in an anti-intentionalist stance, then there could be no coherence or aim to the normative structuring of which it is a central mechanism; and 2) if fully rational, then no cases of spontaneity, actions or reactions in which an agent cannot name that which mobilized their body in this or that way, should exist—but, they do. An example of (1) is demonstrated in a group leader who employs confidence<sup>31</sup>—maybe after recognizing a lack of rhetorical talent in themselves—to invoke a feeling in the group of being in the right, or to convince the group in making this or that move without necessarily rationalizing the move itself. An example of (2) is quite easy: pick any experience in which after the event itself, after choices have been recounted, someone asks, “Why did you do that?” you reply, “I’m not

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<sup>30</sup> “Preconscious” or “presubjective” being two ways of saying the same thing: that affect occurs before the mind makes sense of it.

<sup>31</sup> Confidence being the apex of affect according to Brian Massumi (2005).



really sure. I think I was just scared.”<sup>32</sup> In this manner, I isolate affect from emotion while also understanding affect as constitutive of emotion (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; McGlotten, 2013). To further clarify, we can imagine that our hypothetical group leader, J, is able to produce confidence within the group—confidence being, then, an emotional state each individual within the group now experiences—without feeling that confidence herself. Equally, she may exude confidence *without intending* to do so—though it is the case in our example that she does so choose. J, then, *gives off* confidence in a manner that may or may not succeed while, at the same time, not requiring an extant confidence within that which places it in transmission, which is J in this case. Ultimately, emotion performs a kind of hermeneutic upon affect, a hermeneutic wherein coherence and relevance is defined and delimited by a community. Moreover, we could say that the success of producing a confident group hinges upon the objects or topic under discussion, how J is read by the group, and how the group is read by J. The latter has a further contingency and consequence: what state the group arrives in given their relations to the objects of discussion and what effect that has on J’s performance. This is why for Ahmed, *atmosphere* —i.e. how a given space feels—is not merely that which is read in a unidirectional manner. It actually involves a myriad of entanglements. Thus, in a basic example of success, J exudes an affect picked up in the group as confidence, furthering J’s own confidence, all of which orients the group toward the objects of discussion in a certain way at the same time that the objects are what affectively brought the group

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<sup>32</sup> The point stands through whatever replaces “scared” here (in love, hopeful, sad, angry, etc.)

together in the first place.<sup>33</sup> That is, there already exists a shared relation to the objects that further congeals, in this example, through confidence.

Porn is the object to which my participants share at least one common orientation: an intimate, bodily desire. While they are all young, college educated Arizonians, they are also members of their own communities. As noted in chapter 3, a macro-level split occurs between those who are more or less proximal to heteronormativity and those who are not. I further noted that heteronormative affects are felt and navigated differently according to participants' proximity to whiteness, cognizance of whiteness as enabling of multiple privileges, gender performance, and fluctuating objects of desire. And as Berlant (2011) notes, developed through Eve Sedgwick, affects "are not species of preideological clarity, but quite the opposite: they are taught ... barely known ... and often more sense than event" (p. 159). That is, while there may be instances of affect that appear to derive their source from something like an essential self, however minute in capacity, more often it is the case that our affective registers appear either autonomous or externally influenced by systems, industries, ideologies extant and in motion, well before our own nascence. And, along with discursively produced affects are everyday affective augmentations and curiosities occurring at the interpersonal level, both of which play out in porn consumption. All consumers are affective subject, "a collection of trajectories and circuits ... out there on its own [seeking] out scenes and little worlds to nudge it into being ... to learn to be itself" (Kathleen Stewart, 2007, p. 59)

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<sup>33</sup> E.g. a PTA meeting regarding smartphones in school; a grassroots organization discussing local gun laws; a Catholic sermon on the soul of a fetus; a presidential address on who threatens.

## KEY MODALITIES OF AFFECT

None of the concepts defined below are *wholly* of my own design. Though each has a unique name meant to indicate its application, they are but extensions or, better yet, magnifications of concepts developed by other affect theorists. The analytical lenses related to affect have yet been applied to porn consumption or analysis that is not from the perspective of personal experience. That is to say that while theorists such as Susanna Paasonen develop frameworks of affect specific to porn that are in turn meant to be generalizable, she takes her own somatic archive—her body’s felt memories as collected through a lifetime of experiencing certain pains and pleasures, as well as the touch, push, pull, force, and give of numerous physical objects—as a point of reference. This is not a critique, for I employ Paasonen’s immensely generative frameworks in my thesis. However, my own magnified formulations of Paasonen’s concepts are a consequence of listening not to my own body, but to reflexive descriptions from others. For this reason, I make explicit each of my concepts’ relations to the theorists from which they have been formulated.

### *Affective Triggers and Inhibitors*

An *affective trigger* is not that which triggers an affect. This cannot be the case given that we are always immersed in the input, output, and exchange of affects, a constant dialectical process that does not inherently find its means within the bodies moved or changed by affects (Ahmed 2010). Rather, an affective trigger is an acceptance of a potentiality, an engagement with a process of exchanges begat in a specific instance of an encounter. In this manner, an affective trigger can be subsumed under ordinary affect, a

part of those everyday feelings—of/from an object or person, within an atmosphere either misread or well read—that “give circuits and flows the forms of a life” (Stewart, 2007, p. 2).

Now, if *potentiality*—that which an affective trigger opens up to—is a “thing immanent to fragments of sensory experience [that] engenders attachments or systems of investments in the unfolding of things” (Stewart, 2007, p. 21), then an *affective inhibitor* is that which abandons that unfolding. It acutely negates the potency of an encounter within the occurrence of its unfolding, preventing an agent as an affective subject to be moved or, more colloquially, to ride the winds of change. In this way, there is no inherent moral or ethical value to affective inhibitors sans intentionality. Moreover, unlike an affective trigger, an ordinary affect, an affective inhibitor can be conceptualized as extraordinary.

Let me be clear. Though both affective triggers and inhibitors occur viscerally, triggers *appear* to instantiate an idiosyncratic capacity more than an externally inspired relation, while inhibitors demonstrate the reverse. That is, recalling Berlant, while it is possible that some affective registers are autonomous, affects occur under, or in accordance with, the discursive conditions of an affective subject’s time and place, conditions which the subject, having been *born into*, had no control or say. That triggers appear to find their nascence from within a subject and inhibitors do not is a consequence of there being a more apparent (external) causal relation to inhibitors than triggers. In this way, there is a dialectical relation between inhibitors (external to internal) and triggers (external to internal or emergent from within) that parallels Ahmed’s formulation

of affective flows in general<sup>34</sup>. That being the case, I need not discover whether or what affects are autonomous in nature or not in order for the political consequences inherent within the interplay of triggers and inhibitors to be clear and demonstrable.

### *Auricular Resonance*

While there are substantive differences between the visual and phonic atmospheres of digital spaces and that of non-digital spaces, it does not then follow that the divergence is founded upon their degrees of significance. The felt presence, movement, and resonance of affective flows exist in both arenas. It is the medium of transmission, in this case, that takes many forms, augmenting rather than reconstituting affect's modalities. And through the perennially multiplying mediums of transmission that pornography flows, it is *resonance*, those phenomenal moments of frequency between bodies and/or objects, causing bodies to act or become fixedly entranced in subjective accordance with that sharp encounter (of disgust, wonder, amusement, titillation, to name but a few), that captures our relation to those flows (Paasonen, 2011).

Paasonen's (2011) concept of *carnal resonance* extends the definition of resonance provided above into the realm of bodily unpredictability and contradiction. For Paasonen, and in the case of this thesis, that particular affective modality is capacitated through our somatic archives. That is, the historically constituted sensations remembered in our bodies, as gathered through experience and training,<sup>35</sup> generate archives through which we sense in our own bodies what we see on a screen. In sum,

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<sup>34</sup> Discussed in the introduction of this chapter.

<sup>35</sup> This appears rather pedantic. Really, it saying no more than that you can recall certain sensations in your body in as much as you yourself have experienced them or something proximal in the past.

“somatic archives facilitate particular resonances with pornographic imageries and their carnal acts” (Paasonen, 2011, p. 204). Resonances can be unpredictable or contradictory not to one’s bodily memory, then, but to one’s cerebral sense of the case at hand—i.e. moments of titillation or disgust *become* surprising when one *thought* they would not ever feel such and such a way in such and such encounter. Thus, resonance is also essential to triggers and inhibitors

*Auricular resonance*, in this case, is a mapping of what Paasonen describes as the “visceral grab” of pornography—that manner in which “the semantic and linguistic remain secondary to its fleshy depictions and appeal” (2011, p. 260)—onto the grunts, moans, and slaps of pornography’s textural landscape. This of course marks auricular resonance as applicable to hearing bodies. It is not, however, a necessary condition of pornography’s resonance, only an additional layer of that non-propositional transmission<sup>36</sup> from a digital object to a body. In short, auricular resonance explicates how sounds too resonate in particular ways in one’s body, with one imagining and simultaneously sensing on one’s body from what conditions or locations a motley of carnal sounds might originate. That is, auricular resonance enables us to engender certain images in our minds to the extent that we can close our eyes and continue a visual narrative of the sounds still flowing from the speakers, despite the lack of a coherent discursive narrative of the scene.

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<sup>36</sup> Moans, grunts, and slaps, while sounds, cannot be said to have referents so much as origins (a throat or something like a throat, flesh on flesh, etc.) and thus are as apart from what is semantic or linguistic as the image itself.

### *Digital-Corporeal Harmonizing*

Following directly from the definitions of somatic archives and resonances provided above is another merely extensional concept I call “digital-corporeal harmonizing.” Digital-corporeal harmonizing names intermittent and ephemeral moments where a porn consumer experiences contiguity with the body or bodies, object or objects in a given porn. Through triggers and inhibitors as well as carnal and auricular resonance, the affective subject, “in a partly unactualized state” that is highly “intimate, familiar, and alive” (Stewart, 2007, p. 113), becomes a phenomenal digital body. In a way, I see this as the *how* to Shaka McGlotten’s (2013) suggestion that “gay DIY porn represents a generative aliveness, an active contribution to and elaboration of networked bodies and desires” (p. 103). Following McGlotten, as will be further explicated in the section that follows, digital-corporeal harmonizing is a kind of intimate pornographic relation that *reveals* extant queer desire, where “queer” refers not to that which is normatively understood as homosexual but to any object of desire not otherwise stipulated as proper under heteronormative conditions: a heel, a whip, a word, an animation; or, the sweat, moan, or movement of a performer who does or does not share a gendered relation to the consumer. Heteronormativity<sup>37</sup>, as an affective field of immunity nationalism (Chen, 2012), does not, on the other hand, *admit* to the reality of such intimacies even as they

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<sup>37</sup> While defined multiple times throughout this thesis, it is important to remember, as queer literature has revealed, how heteronormativity performs through ideological stipulations of what is normative (read: these are the things that make you ethical, legible, and normal to the community) for heterosexuals. In that way, while queers are always already nonnormative, heterosexuals, too, can *become* nonnormative—and through transitivity, queer—through improper performance or improper erotic attachments. Porn consumption, as an improper erotic attachment, is preordained a nonnormative practice and thus already carries a particular weight for heterosexual subjects.

occur. As will be shown, queerer participants (which, again, does not exclude heterosexuals) do not exhibit the same *distancing from* particular pornographic encounters as those more proximal to heteronormative ideologies.

### *Idiosyncratic Vicarity*

Intentionally designated to the end of this section, *idiosyncratic vicarity* is but a logical consequence of the former concepts. Expanding on what I already stated in chapter 3, the manner in which consumers use porn vicariously diverges in degree and, more importantly, in kind as a consequence of affects. Of course, a few important similarities between those who are similarly situated exist and are noted.

To be sure, “vicarity” is not yet a word found in any official dictionary. Rather, it is a word formulated by an online community<sup>38</sup>, defined on Urban Dictionary as “that which is experienced vicariously” (Chrome Toaster, 2009). “Vicarity” is in that sense non-authorial, having plural origin within an actor-network (Bruno Latour, 2005). Such is borne out in the tag line on Urban Dictionary: #vicarious #internet #experience #virtual #reality. If not obvious already, I chose to use “vicarity” in a thesis on online porn consumption for exactly that reason.

## MEDIUMS OF AFFECT: DEVICES & DIGITAL PORNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS

It is important to recall some points from chapter 1. First, “affect must always be understood in relation to the specificity of the technical media that enable it” (Paasonen, Hills, Petit, 2015, p. 17). Second, a digital object becomes pornography when it is used

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<sup>38</sup> Much like the emergence of “fap,” “bae,” “the feels,” or “af.”



as such (Ullén, 2013); although, it does not follow as a logical consequence that outside of such contexts the object is inherently or intentionally an object of pornography (Mikkola, 2017). Before beginning the analysis, then, I will take a brief moment to detail the devices and interfaces through which my participants consume porn.

All participants consume porn on either smartphones or tablets more than any other devices such as laptops or home computers. This means participants are typically immersing into screens ranging from 3.5 inches (the smallest iPhone screen) to 12.9 inches (the largest iPad), with resolution ranging from around 150 pixels per inch (on the low end) to a current max of around 320 (Type Code). Both smartphones and tablets are interfaced through touchscreen. This means consumers need not require a mediating device such as a keyboard or mouse. While a smartphone can be carried on a person, if pockets permit, or a backpack, a tablet, if not carried in hand, requires a pack of some kind, whether that be in the form of a backpack, satchel or medium to large purse.

While there are numerous porn streaming sites, all participants speak to streaming porn through PornHub more than any other site. PornHub presents itself as both a commercial venue and community venue, containing a wide variety of commercial porn and amateur porn, some of which is uploaded by subscribers. In the homepage, video links are laid out as multiple square windows showing a screenshot from the video to which the link leads. Upon entering the site, a consumer initially finds an assortment of what are the most popular videos of the week. If the consumer holds the mouse over a video link, a linear sequences of screenshots (ranging in number) play for a few seconds so that a consumer can gain some idea of what the video contains. Every video has a popularity rating, which is noted as a percentage (i.e. concerned consumers can generate

a rating of the video by clicking or tapping a thumbs up or thumbs down icon on the viewer screen) on the bottom right of the small square window. Atop the homepage are navigation links of preset categories (e.g. Teens, Anal, and Ebony, to name but a few of their multivariable categories). If a consumer is seeking a particular category<sup>39</sup> not found in the navigation links, then they can use the search bar. While the site is free to enter, if a consumer does not pay a monthly subscription fee, then they can only view 2-5 minute clips of certain commercial porn. Most amateur porn or porn uploaded by the community can be viewed in its entirety, however. That being the case, none of my participants subscribe to PornHub.<sup>40</sup> A video can be viewed in either full screen or as a partial screen, in which case a consumer can simultaneously consume porn and scroll through further selections of videos related to the video being streamed, read community comments, or even add their own comments.

Certain participants also consume porn through Tumblr and Reddit. Given the Tumblr app, participants typically navigate Tumblr through their phones or tablets. A touchscreen interface, consumers merely scroll through images, image macros, GIFs, or video clips by running a thumb vertically across the screen. Since Tumblr requires a profile, participants find porn by subscribing to other users who post pornographic content, whether that content be their own or not. Reddit, on the other hand, is almost wholly interfaced through a tablet or laptop given its lack of a smartphone format. Reddit is far less known for its pornographic content than its meme content. As will be covered,

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<sup>39</sup> That could be anything from a genre of porn to race or body type of the porn performers.

<sup>40</sup> Most participants also avoid subscription in order to avoid a suspected higher chance of a roommate or family member discovering their use of porn.

participants use Reddit to view what are more often remixes (in the form of a GIF, usually) of pornographic content. To remix an image or a video is to reengineer the digital object into something apart from its original intention, meaning, or presentation (Michele Knobel & Colin Lankshear 2006). Such remixed imagery takes on whole new affective potentialities that are often quite apart from the erotic.

### *Screens*

Regardless of the numerous devices available to participants or the original devices on which porn was initially consumed—a sibling’s Nintendo DSI, as in the case of Peter and Buhairai; a parent’s PC, as in the case of Meeseeks and Johto; or one’s own smartphone or tablet, as in the case of Alphonse, Mike, and Rob—all *participants* comfortably settled into relying on that device which they find most *convenient*. Stating things straightforwardly, Rob sums up his tablet preference as “just portability.” Similarly, Johto suggests relying on a small device is about “accessibility. It’s just easy to use. I mean, it’s in my pocket.” In a kind of explication of the former two, Peter states, “I just use my phone. I feel like using my computer is just too much. I don’t need to see porn on like a 20 inch screen.” Each participant marks tablets or smartphones as their preferred device due to some aspect of convenience. However, despite consistency in devices, participants diverge in what manner of delivery their devices reflected that convenience.

For Rob, using his tablet, “a fun and portable thing” has the added benefit of suiting his significant near-sightedness. In particular, supine on his bed, tablet held upon his chest and within a foot of his face, Rob can relieve himself of his glasses and immerse

into the porn of his liking<sup>41</sup>. A screen held close to one's face while in lying supine in a comfortable milieu—a cool dark room, a soft bed, warm sheets—appears to be the preferred positioning among most participants.

Buhairai provides the following example upon my inquiry into why he prefers to consume porn through his Samsung Note: “I like it at night when I turn up the brightness and it's like the only thing I see. Like, I get tunnel vision hardcore. If I hold it right here [within 12” from face], I'm totally immersed.” Mike, too, explains how he typically consumes through a smaller screen close to his face:

I don't like the laptop because it's far away. Like, I can't have it on my chest and doing what I want at the same time. And I have an old Mac, which is like heavy as fuck. Whereas with my phone, it's lightweight, handheld, I can have it close. I like to have it close ... it's more about being able to see everything.

In a disparate fashioning of convenience, Johto points to the bodily freedom with such devices: “It's like a water bottle—it's in your hand, and you have the freedom to do anything else with the rest of your body. Like, you can walk around!”

What becomes clear is the disparate affective digital landscapes through which participants consume porn. It is not merely a matter of the largest or closest screen; nor do participants merely seek out that which best places them in the position of voyeur or that which facilitates a vicarious sense of point of view (POV). As Buhairai contends,

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<sup>41</sup> Idiosyncrasies of immersion are discussed at the end of this chapter.

“in general I’m not really a fan of POV [porn] because, even though it tries to put me in the zone, it’s almost like they’re trying too hard to put me there. Like, I can’t imagine myself there.” With a little more self-reflection, Peter states of virtual reality porn, invariably the most immersive of POV porn, that “the more I looked into it, the more I see that it’s people trying to replicate what they’re seeing in porn. Whereas for me, it’s more about enjoying myself.” On the other hand, Rob, a young Christian virgin who only seeks out amateur/realcore porn, attains a better sense of the “ecstasy” of sex, of a woman’s pleasure, he desires to experience with his future lover. Though, it is not the case, of course, that POV is the only way that such desires are realized. Already, participants reveal that idiosyncratic vicarity is best explained through the multiple modalities of affects capacitated through online pornography, a multiplicity not exhausted here.

### *Queer Digital Spaces and their Objects*

Historically institutionalized within the US and, thereby, nationalized and ostensibly universal, heteronormativity has shadowed almost every space, physical or otherwise, pushing queer populations to seek out and co-construct, even if only for intermittent moments, affective cultural spaces and economies outside of the otherwise public sphere (José Esteban Muñoz, 1999, Ann Cvetkovich, 2003, Michael Warner, 2005). The seeking and/or co-construction of queer spaces occurs all over the US, but is probably best facilitated through the internet. Moreover, and in line with Alexander Cho’s (2015) use of the “multivalent and slippery” analytic (p. 46), “queer” ranges both over what is traditionally understood as belonging to LGBTQ communities and that which is non-

normative in general. Video game consoles, online gaming sites, and sites such as Reddit and Tumblr rather than mega porn sites such as PornHub, often better facilitate queer affective landscapes for *both* those who consider themselves part of the LGBTQ community and those who do not.

To no surprise, then, while none of my hetero participants spoke significantly to non-commercial spaces, Mike and Peter, the former a gay transman, the latter queer and non-binary, are more likely to consume porn outside of commercial or intentionally pornographic spaces. In fact, it was through Tumblr that Peter had an affective queer encounter that left him wondering, for their first time, if they were not so heteronormative after all<sup>42</sup>. Today, Peter uses Tumblr to “find independent people who are making their own porn.” That is, Tumblr serves as *the* space for Peter to find user-generated pornography from other non-binary individuals. Consequently, Peter has recently begun uploading their own amateur porn on Tumblr. Though it is clear that Tumblr served and continues to serve an important role in Peter’s life, they currently consume multiple genres of porn on multiple sites.

Mike first encountered porn through Tumblr. Though he later learned of other sites, that there was porn enough on Tumblr kept Mike, at least throughout high school, returning to what he was familiar with. The perfect space for experimentation, Mike consumed multiple forms of amateur porn before moving fully to gay porn, something that happened before Mike realized it was the case. At the time, Mike still identified as a girl, but was coming to realize he felt non-alignment with that identity. That the gay porn he consumed on Tumblr played a major role during that transition speaks to the

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<sup>42</sup> This is further discussed in the section titled “Why Porn?”

preconscious manner in which resonances occur in the alignment of bodily frequencies, something to which I return in the following section.

Three of my hetero participants speak in varying degrees to porn consumption on non-commercial sites, including consumption of a passive sort in Rob's case. For Rob, there is a specific subReddit titled "NSFW"—an acronym for "not safe for work"—in which users upload images and GIFs, in particular, with pornographic content that are not necessarily intended for masturbatory use. James Ash (2015) proposes that rather than simply imposing "a new narrative through its reediting"—as GIFs are compressed digital image files, usually a very brief animation loop—a "GIF creates new resonances and rhythms of sensation, which can potentially generate new affects" (p. 126). For example, Rob reflects:

One example that always makes me laugh hysterically is this 10 second GIF. It's a boy/girl scene in porn. I think it's just after the cum shot scene. Y'know, there's sperm all around the girl's vagina, and the camera zooms in on her vagina because it's about to transition to the next scene and they use the vagina as the center where it opens up into the next scene, haha! The first time I saw that I was laughing for like 5 whole minutes.

Through Ash, we can capture the non-uniformity of affects as well as how Rob's five minutes of hysterical laughter demonstrates both the situational contingencies of

pornographic objects and, more importantly, the manner in which affects modalities are indeed augmented by its medium of delivery.

My two other hetero participants who spoke to noncommercial spaces, Buhairai and Meeseeks, both encountered queer desires for animated digital objects through gaming. In Buhairai's case, who shared much gaming time with his sibling in his youth, he once mastered a specific character on the world Nintendo hit, *Super Smash Bros*, "only because she was attractive" to him. In fact, Buhairai later switched gaming platforms for this desire: "I remember I got a PlayStation, because I took time and I thought about it—I literally remember thinking, *okay, which system has the best graphics, and which one has the most females relative to that.*" For Meeseeks, online gaming sites such as Wet Pussy Games—where he can play action/adventure games that "get straight to the point," dress up a hentai<sup>43</sup> avatar, or enact BDSM with hentai avatars—facilitate a process of queer desire. That is, Meeseeks, while one of the more vocal of my participants on the fixity of his heterosexuality, here immerses in moments of desire for the wrong objects under and only under any normative conditions.

Lastly, after a 15 minute focus group discussion on Furies and hentai tropes, Johto worked up the courage to admit what is probably his most non-normative encounter:

There's like a subReddit called "Dragons Fucking Cars." And I was like,

*What could this possibly be besides, like, the title?* I clicked on it, and

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<sup>43</sup> Hentai are pornographic Japanese animations, whether pictures or videos, that vary immensely in subject matter: from lesbian school girls to alien beings with multiple formations of phalluses or anatomical orifices, often referred to by English speakers as "tentacle porn."



literally, like, pictures of dragons with giant dicks plowing through vehicles. And I was like wha? Like, why would I watch this? And then a few months later I saw it again and was like, *Fuck it.*

Genuinely intrigued, Peter asked how pleasurable the orgasm was. Johto responded, “I’m very good at making a new experience very immersed and euphoric. I was able to *be* in the experience ... so, it was like a seven out of ten experience.” To which Peter replied, “That’s pretty decent.”

Mistakenly dichotomized as the erotic versus pornographic, participants’ affective resonances and intensities reveal the near-absurdity of demarcating only natural (as opposed to digital) objects of desire. They reveal, after all, how sex and sexuality, whether in its mediated forms or not, perform affective attachments beyond and before love and reproduction. Queer digital spaces facilitate the most intriguing and decentralizing expressions of a human’s object desire, thereby deconstructing essentialist notions of desire and their object relations fully in the instances of their occurrence.

## MODALITIES OF AFFECT 1: THE PORNOSPHERE

*I was like, “oh.”*

In the section in which I articulated the key modalities of affect to be employed throughout this analysis, I discussed the manner in which an affective trigger, far from a mere triggering, invokes a kind of agential immersion into non-uniform affective encounters. A key element in my framing of this affective instance, apart from Ahmed, Stewart, and Berlant, is derived from the multiple instances in which participants quite

literally recalled and paraphrased unforeseen resonant encounters as “I was like, ‘oh’”, illuminating moments of titillation that *appear* to have come from nowhere. Again, triggers also appear to instantiate subjectively generated affect, something between autonomous and discursively produced, which participants as affective subjects either follow or do not follow similar to the now proverbial rabbit. In this way, triggers are also instances of optimism defined as “both an attunement to the not yet, and a queer perspectival shift toward or refraction of an interesting present” (McGlotten, 2013, p. 73).

For example, I turn to two examples from Peter and Alphonse, respectively, which occurred during our focus group discussion. It is important to note the manner in which Alphonse gleans onto the affective nature of Peter’s monologue:

Peter: I was on Tumblr and I had watched this softcore, like, gentle porn. And then, like, I had realized, like halfway through that it was guys the whole time. And I was like, *damn, wow, that’s’ weird; I just watched 7 minutes of gay porn.*<sup>44</sup> And then like I came back to it like a couple weeks later, a couple months later, and I was like, *alrighty, I guess I’m like a little more secure in my identity ...* And maybe by like accepting it, porn kinda helped me develop or like accept my attraction to people of the same sex and ... that I wasn’t straight or Cis.

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<sup>44</sup> The use of italics instead of quotes reflects that these are moments in which participants are providing a kind of retrospective narrative to an affective instance rather than recalling an actual thought or verbalization.

Alphonse: I guess, like, *in some area*<sup>45</sup> I can kind of relate to that. Like, when I was on shrooms—well, before that I had watched transgender porn. And I was like really grossed out. But, I dunno, when I was like on shrooms, I was telling myself that I needed to be more of an open minded individual. And like, yea, I watched transgender porn during the experience. And I'm like, *oh! this is good shit*. And after that, I now find that porn to be pretty good. It has helped me to be more accepting, to better understand trans people.

There is a temptation to criticize the fact that Alphonse's initial experience occurred while under the influence of psilocybin. However, that Alphonse retains an intimacy with transgender pornography that he recalls as initiated in an agentive manner undermines a need to state empirically if psilocybin engenders new and false affective states. Alphonse demonstrates a queering affective potentiality within pornography whose fulfillment is facilitated through a more or less lax relation to heteronormativity. Alphonse understands his heterosexuality as fluid enough to accommodate transgender pornography. While Gary Wilson's heteronormative analyses of HOCD and SOCD within the NoFap community reveals the manner in which "racial and sexual discourses converged in psychological models that understood 'unnatural' desire as a marker of perversion" (Siobhan Somerville, 1994, p. 256), both Peter and Alphonse reveal the far too often unstated significance of a consumers' context of encounter. However, while pornography can be an exercise in subject formation, it can also be an exercise in mere

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<sup>45</sup> My emphasis.

fantasy, which “exceeds the limits of the possible and the present, and very often even the desirable” (Juana María Rodríguez, 2014, p. 180). Meaning, there can be a lack of correspondence between a virtual erotic attachment and how a subject (who enacts that attachment) performs in and/or navigates through the world. Fantasy-to-reality or the reverse is constrained by the systems of signification and affects that precede the subject and delimit or corrode the possibilities within pleasures, queer or otherwise (Rodríguez, 2014).

While many participants paraphrase initial encounters that became virtual intimate life worlds facilitating subject formation or fantasy, they also speak to those more acute instances which we often denote as experimental. In either case, we see the body-before-mind modality of affect. Mike, for instance, when articulating his transition from Tumblr to PornHub states:

I started using PornHub not even to watch porn for my own self, like sexual pleasure, but as in like, *this is funny as hell* ... There’s so much weird shit on there. Like, that’s what I’d look at kind of. And then, eventually, I’d stumble upon something that was like, *oh!*

In fact, it is in this subdued sense that Mike discusses his own surfing for porn if and when he didn’t have a specific object of desire in mind. That is, Mike, horny sans object, would simply surf PornHub until, *oh!*

To be sure, triggers are not particular to digital navigation only. As Johto demonstrates, there can be—though, not in a fundamental sense—reciprocating flows between digital landscapes and the spaces/worlds through which one has transversed:

So, like, when I'm working out, typically that's gonna be around some big, like, body building dudes. And so, I think when I see them, I'm like, *That's what I'm into right now.* But if I'm at the track or swimming, typically you're gonna see more women in those vicinities. So sometimes, that's all that's in my mind. And sometimes, they mix into each other and you'll think about double penetration, and you'll think about gangbangs and that kind of mixture of stuff.

Relatedly, Johto further informs me of a sort of practice he makes out of immersing into particular types of porn depending on the gender of his partner or of a potential partner. As if espying the illustrations I am seeking, Johto informs me: "I'm not sure if it's a super reciprocal relationship, but it does at times have an *effect* on the *environment* I'm *looking towards.*" Given that affects construct worlds in as much as they play a kind of vestibule for intimacies (McGlotten, 2013), we see how affects' overflow within a present moment of Johto's porn consumption engender imminences of his own agential directing.

*“The hell?”*

Having clarified the floodgate effect of affective triggers, I begin this section not with a direct demonstration of an affective inhibitor—demonstrations which I will get to—but with an example revealing the complex circulation of triggers and inhibitors. To begin, Buhairai informed me of a summer long “obsession” with anal porn in his middle teenage years. An obsession which, as he recalls, directly followed from overhearing so many other boys claim that anal was the apex of sex and desire. Why only a summer? As he tells it, exploring anal porn led him to “the more hardcore stuff,” which brought him “to the amateur side of porn.” At first, given his youth and naiveté, this “more hardcore stuff” of amateur meant “little teen with big boobs who gets pounded by some giant dude.” This, according to Buhairai, gave presentation to a growing interest in a gendered differential he experienced as a rather large young man among what he notes as many smaller women—a constructed disparity that commercial porn often hyperbolizes, depicting “heterosex as a game involving clear-cut difference” (Paasonen, 2011, p. 122). Instead of pathologizing Buhairai’s young desire, or the porn that exploits it, I will view this moment in Buhairai’s life as demonstrating the manner in which—as Berlant, through Sedgwick, shows—an affective attunement, externally derived, can induce a resonant attachment that is, in some cases, merely an ephemeral event. That is, until the affective subject encounters a world with a frequency alignment that strikes the subject as true to the self (Stewart, 2007). This “self” indeed must be understood as historical in nature, as subject to heterosexist discourses and imageries as to the edges and apertures of the physical and emotional milieus—private as well as public—in which the subject develops. Recalling chapter 3, in which Buhairai discusses his exploration and

newfound attunement—in part, due to his partner—with BDSM, it is important to note his nonlinear and opaque navigation through the world of hardcore. That is, though Buhairai was following some *sense* or *intuition*<sup>46</sup> regarding his desire, each new case of hardcore, including the fragile teen phase, was met with too many affective instances of what many participants vocalize as, “the hell?”—that is, affective inhibitors. To be concise, Buhairai rather quickly felt his way through to the fact that where pain was evident but pleasure not, such hardcore porn lost its resonance with him. Not until BDSM did Buhairai discover, as he states—ending the following proposition with an upward inflection of a question, and thereby intimating a retrospectivity to an unfolding similar to what Muñoz (2009) calls the “not-quite-conscious,” affective overflows of queer encounters in the present—“It was the kind of hurting I wanted to see...?”

It is worth repeating that imposing an ethical value on inhibitors remains moot at best. On the other hand, as an affect with the capacities of capture and redirection, inhibitors do play out in the world in numerous, often contradictory, ways. Continuing in a vein of productive if not merely morally ambiguous examples, I turn now to two white, queer participants, Johto and Mike, whose encounters with respective genres of racialized pornography demonstrate related yet ultimately divergent trigger-inhibitor circulations<sup>47</sup>.

“When it came to watching straight porn, it had to be amateur. There was no way I was watching a professional straight porn, because I know that it’s not ethical.” Here,

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<sup>46</sup> Lauren Berlant (2011) is particularly generative here: “People develop worlds for their new intuitions ... where they live in rhythm of the habit called personality that can never quite settle into shape” (p. 93).

<sup>47</sup> To be clear, as I may be taking this for granted through a sort of transitive process of my argument thus far, I have mapped the circulation of affects that Ahmed articulates onto the circulation of triggers and inhibitors.

Mike makes a subjective claim on what marks some porn as unethical: “If there’s something with a woman in it, it’s harder for me to look at it for pleasure because I first have to analyze if they’re actually enjoying it.” That is to say, echoing Buhrairai, while Mike does not shy away from rougher forms of pornography, he holds to a general rule: no pain without (transparent) pleasure. Or, in his own words: “Like, it’s just sort of pain. No pleasure from the bottom or whatever;” which, surely, exhibits a subjective retreat to one’s somatic archive. In this way, Mike considers himself a conscious porn consumer. Now, as a *white* conscious porn consumer, Mike, in the focus group discussion, expressed how his social positioning as a white subject, prevents him from enjoying certain racialized porn. Specifically, Mike informs the group that he has a married-in, Korean side of the family. And because he has become particularly attuned to their relation to hegemonic discourses—commenting on a cousin who will not date white men because she cannot be sure if they are not merely fetishizing her—Mike avoids Asian porn. Whether it be porn that is gay, straight, or otherwise: “I want to avoid that, like, stigma. Because, it like disgusts me.”

Much like Mike, whose examples of Asian porn avoidance derived from Korean family relations, Johto believes he engendered a particular relation to Latinx porn through the married-in, Mexican side of his extended family. Rather than a closing off, as in Mike’s case, Johto’s proximity to racial alterity initiates an unfolding, inflected as it is by Johto’s cognizance of his white positionality, which plays its own inhibitive role:

When I do consume porn, I noticed that among the top words that I search for—both men and women—includes, like, “Latina,” “teen Latina,” or



like “Latina maid”... And I know typically that stereotype is problematic ... But it’s also one of those weird circles, because I balance it out by saying, like, “well, it’s a form of media.” But then in the end I’m like still playing a part of that, like, process. And, like, do I do something to boycott this? Or is it okay for me to look up “teen Latina maid” or whatever? It’s like a kind of weird dilemma that I think about often, and I’m still not crystal clear on it.

Again, fantasy enabled through the virtual does not necessarily correspond to the actual state of the world; nor does a taboo’s modality as fantasy always feel pleasurable to consumers who are cognizant of or even subject to the violences concomitant with the structures and ideologies that produce something as a taboo or only available through fantasy in the first place. Structures and ideologies that surveil as well as delimit pleasure’s possibilities precede the subject, as do their affective flows and meanings (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Rodríguez, 2014). Inhibitors as external and bound to geo-spatial location become clear as day in this case. And while the discussion thus far has not exhausted case illustrations of triggers or inhibitors, both will play a role in what follows. As stated before, this chapter’s layout employs a stacking method.

## MODALITIES OF AFFECT 2: IMMERSIONS

### *Pornography’s Sonic Atmosphere*

To get directly to the matter at hand, I turn to Mike, who asserts: “I still look for very vocal porn, because like if it’s not vocal, then it’s not really porn to me.” The noise of

pornography is in fact so potent, so full of force and affective overflow for Mike that he even sometimes turn to audio porn where and when visual porn fails him, stating, “I listen to audio porn, which is sometimes better if you can’t find anything at all, because it does have to rely on the vocalness [sic].” When I inquired into concomitant imageries that must follow from such an encounter, Mike replied, “It’s really great when I’m looking for just vocal and I’m sick of seeing bodies that are doing shit that I don’t like.” Auricular resonance, then, clarifies that process of sensual phonic attunement. In Mike’s case, auricular resonance’s potency and nonpropositional modality, as it too pulls from one’s somatic archive, instantiates erotic bodily pleasures while simultaneously capacitating the means to conjure subjective fantasies of the circumstances under which the pornographic sounds might occur.

In another example, Buhrairai developed a similar yet different kind of attachment to pornography’s often inflated erotic soundscapes. That is, having started his porn consumption with commercial hetero porn, Buhrairai explains: “I remember it was Bri Olsen. And I remember she had like a squeaky voice and I began *to turn toward that*<sup>48</sup> as well. It was like girls screaming or shrieking.” (In further discussion, Buhrairai clarified how it is not necessarily a shriek or scream that he was looking for so much as that that is the pornographic vernacular he encountered and thus employed in his searches). And while Bri Olsen’s squeaky vocality kept Buhrairai returning in his youth, as he began to venture beyond the commercial, remaining attached to the vocal, he soon discovered that “how loud it was meant it was better. Like, if I had to turn down the volume on my headphones, then that meant it was a good porn.” As a point of convergence, both Mike

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<sup>48</sup> My emphasis.

and Buhrairai employed the term “thrill” to capture this phenomenon. Auricular resonance, then, informs us that the referent for “thrill” in these cases is that resonating erotic frequency within their bodies capacitated by the somatic and variegated by experience or lack thereof.

Unlike other participants, Johto expressed an attachment to the vocal that is, interestingly enough, contingent upon the gender of the performers. When Johto was in high school, for instance, at a time when he “identified strictly as gay,” the porn he most consumed involved “muscular dudes, and definitely more eccentric, over the top porn with people moaning super loud and, quote, ‘faking it.’” However, he states, “for hetero porn, I don’t like the whole over the top thing. This is gonna sound kind of bad, but I think it’s because I don’t like when girls moan super loud—kind of scream and stuff.” That is, high pitched screams or moans serve as a phonic affective inhibitor in Johto’s case.

Rob, too, expressed his distaste for hyperbolized vocalizations. That such exaggeration is concomitant to commercial porn plays a role in Rob’s desire for amateur. As an inhibitor to his own pleasure, commercial porn, like the GIFs discussed in the previous section, induce more laughter than erotic or carnal resonance within him. Still, it is not that the vocal itself—as if there were a universal type—disturbs Rob. For, as Rob admits, he would “much rather watch something where it’s like a couple’s homemade tape; something that actually happened in a moment of intimacy, rather than was filmed to mirror intimacy.” Rob’s desire to witness and, we should add, hear a woman in authentic “ecstasy” sheds light on how certain vocalities—those he imagines as authentic—serve as triggers while others—those that seem exaggerated and thereby

inauthentic—serve as inhibitors to the kind of intimate world that Rob as a virgin, rightly or wrongly, it does not matter, both imagines and desires sex to be.

### *Digital Phenomenal Ephemera*

Under heteronormative ideology, a historical frame for social and biological scripts (Somerville, 1994; Ferguson, 2004), one is left believing that it *is merely* in the reproductive sense or aesthetic sense, that one harbors, enacts, and directs their desires. However, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1999) famously stated, “The world is everything that is the case” (p. 29). Stripped of its positivism—an epistemology which Wittgenstein himself abandoned—if we read “that is the case” as that which instantiates an inherent legitimacy, that which has ontic-cum-affective presence in the world, then we can reimagine that statement, a bit more poetically, as “The desires are everything that is the case.” To the concern at hand, and to reiterate, digital-corporeal harmonizing names intermittent and ephemeral moments where a porn consumer experiences contiguity with the body or bodies, object or objects in porn. As a vestibular relation, it *reveals* extant queer desire: a heel, a whip, a word, an animation; the skin, sweat, moan, or movement of a performer who does or does not share a gendered relation to the consumer. If but for a moment, consumers are capable of imagining themselves, in a felt manner, as things, human or nonhuman, corporeal or abstract, within the porn they consume. Such digital ephemeral phenomena are encounters similar the “utopian impulse” that Muñoz (2009, p.26) defines as a kind of extant, humming hope. Its horizon qua affective overflow is perceived as much as it is felt within the present, tempered as it is, however, by a kind of cruel optimism manifested within and through neoliberal capitalist institutions and

ideologies (Berlant, 2011). I am not trying to over-romanticize porn consumption in total, as if there were no mere instrumental masturbatory encounters, a “quicky” as some including myself would say. But it is my contention that those quickies, too, incorporate on a more subdued level—that is, less cognitively at the forefront—these affective modes of encounter. As Buhairai summed in his experience: “Like, if I’m really feeling it, then I can make myself last and I’ll look for something longer, but if I just need a little stress relief before sleep, then I’ll just pick a short one.”

“Rising action,” “warmth,” “buildup,” “security,” “anticipation,” “intimacy factor;” these are some of the words participants invoke trying to capture those phenomenal moments I illuminate through digital-corporeal harmonizing. As previously highlighted, that language, that vestibular affective relation shimmering intermittently throughout a scene of consumption, somehow escapes my participants who intimate a more fixed sense of their heterosexuality. I will address those cases briefly—that brevity acting doubly as a mirror to their cursory immersions—before attending to those who do reveal such immersions to their fuller extent.

It is not my intention to belittle Rob, Meeseeks, and Ricky. Rather, here, I am merely indicating the manner in which heterosexuality—in a fixed sense derived from the hegemonic discourses in which these young men developed—performs an inhibitor in their lives. All three of them reveal respectively dynamic relations to porn: as a method of Christian heteroromantic futurity in Rob’s case; to vicariously inhabit the irresistibly seductive in Meeseek’s case; to mediate and perform a kind of distanced love in Ricky’s case. Beyond those quick glimpses, those shimmers not taken for granted here, all three of these participants reflected on their immersions as concentration on certain body parts

of the woman—particularly, the buttocks and the back—while also avoiding as much as possible any sight of the male performers genitalia. There is nothing particularly ill about concentration on body parts given how they reveal the transfixing power of such body parts in motion. There is something to be said about avoiding as much as possible, any sight of male genitalia. However, most telling is the manner in which each of these participants struggled, if said anything at all, to articulate anything past that.

On the topic of hentai, lesbian hentai being his particular go to, Alphonse stated: “I like where there’s like two girl friends who have feelings for each other, but never say anything about those feelings throughout and then they... fall in love.” Having little familiarity with the genre, I ask Alphonse what specifically draws him to lesbian hentai: “I guess for me, like, I have to watch the buildup and anticipation. And if I don’t see the anticipation then I’ll rewind it back.” Regarding that anticipation, Alphonse further expressed, “I watch the anticipation and then when they start, like, then I’ll start masturbating.” Which is to say, in such instances the rhythms and flows of Alphonse’s own sense of erotic anticipation matches that which the animated characters themselves express.

On the topic of orgasm, invoking the trigger effect of vocality as well, Buhrairai commented:

The reason why I think lesbian porn is so successful to me is because you’re guaranteed to see a woman’s orgasm at some point. And if I can time it right to come at the same time, then that’s just perfect. But what I

really like is a girl's orgasm that leads to a really loud noise. Coming at that time is exactly perfect.

Again, this plays a role in Buhairai's attachment to rough porn and BDSM, which is more likely to involve performers' screaming orgasms, veritable moments of pleasure augmented through pain—the “kind of pain,” as he put it, that Buhairai wants to see.

In the previous subsection on pornography's sonic atmosphere, Johto expressed a kind of circulating affective pulse between the world and pornography, wherein erotic digital transversals can have “an effect on the environment” that Johto is “looking towards” and/or, spaces with, what we often call, a sexual charge to them lead Johto to immerse in a medley of pornographic utopias. In a demonstration of that idiosyncratic vicarity that I am asserting ranges over all consumers, but which is most apparent in my queer participants, Johto laid out this digital phenomenal encounter: “If it's getting into multiple person sex, I can definitely, like, place myself in different positions—from the receiver, penetrator, or even the person filming or whatever. It's easy to place yourself in different roles in multiple person sex.” Digital-corporeal harmonizing allows us to understand that occurrence, and those described before as moments when participants felt—in a kind of ghost impression—within themselves what they were seeing in porn, but often in a way that goes beyond what mirrors their gender—as with Buhairai and screaming lesbian orgasms—or physicality—as with Alphonse and lesbian hentai.

To reveal the immensity of that immersion, particularly that which goes beyond someone's current gender expression and sexual anatomy, I turn now to Mike, for whom,

recalling chapter 3, pornography “was really pivotal” in coming to terms with his trans gender:

I don’t think I ever watched lesbian porn and imagined it was me ...

Whereas with gay porn, that’s when I first realized, *This could be me!*

And that didn’t happen with straight porn. I could imagine it, but I was focused on receiving, like, a man. Then at one point, when I transitioned to just gay porn, I was like, *I could be either of these roles!* And so, the more I thought about it and watched it, the more I enjoyed putting myself in those positions and hoping that one day I would be in that position.

In another example of multiple entanglements, this time regarding objects of desire, Johto articulated an occurrence of deep immersion as:

It’s like that tunnel vision. At this point I’m just like deeply watching like ass cheeks and stuff—the thick muscular dude engaging in sex. And you have that like sense of *warmth*, that *heat*, that *comfort* ... It’s also like the proximity and the *physical flesh of each other’s flesh* touching and stuff. It’s interesting to look around that picture and see, like, the chair they’re sitting on and how it’s indenting their skin and what that feels like. And even the sweat of the situation, paying attention to their breathing, like how heavy it is.



Finally, I turn to Peter. To understand Peter's relation to non-binary DIY pornography—that is, as both a user and producer—I want to take a moment to reiterate McGlotten's (2013) suggestion that “gay DIY porn represents a generative aliveness, an active contribution to and elaboration of networked bodies and desires” (p. 103) given my assertion that digital-corporeal harmonizing pinpoints that “generative aliveness” within networked bodies and desires. That is, DIY porn in Peter's case as a non-binary individual, much like the trans vlog in Tobias Raun's (2012, p.177) analysis, “becomes a technology of the self” that—and here we diverge from Raun—does *not* “[try] out and [incorporate] culturally located practices that define gender,” but circulates carnal resonances, a means for digital-corporeal harmonizing, in order to situate pleasure and legibility in a non-binary person, in Peter. Lastly, it is essential to recognize and include an analytic of affective labor that frames the exchange as “immaterial sex, where libidinal, emotional, and physiological energies, desires, and sensations that are a function of human capital and surplus value” (Stephen Maddison, 2015, p.163) since it underpins how, despite its prima facie empowerment, DIY porn stands as an attachment of cruel optimism in as much as that is the case for attachments to any object whose promise and value is always forth coming yet for which the arrival is barred through the object's own existence.

For Peter, DIY porn that “operates off the non-binary, like gender queer for example,” provides him with substantive reason to believe that people whose gender and bodily presentation and performance are rendered illegible under heteronormative ideology “can still be sexually happy.” Given that fact, and wanting to take part, Peter had recently begun generating his own amateur porn, which they share through Tumblr.

What is more, their erotic Tumblr account includes a bio which, according to Peter, shares their non-binary/gender queer status, their personality assessment, what mental illnesses they've been diagnosed with, their age, and what things they're interested in. It is best to present in Peter's own words what that account means for them:

I feel empowered after I upload ... I guess I feel dirty. That's part of it. I feel like more turned on knowing that if I post my naked body on the internet, other people are gonna see that and that helps get me off ... If I get paid for it, whatever. But any praise I get from it would be astounding—to have somebody reach out and just like appreciate it, even if it's just liking a picture.

#### HOPE AND CRUELTY: PORN THROUGH THE INTERNET

The internet is not the apex of liberating spaces, free as any space could be from state or capital intervention, as Web 2.0 advocates would have one believe (Maddison, 2010; Paolo Gerbaudo, 2012); rather it is something “immanent to late capitalism ... an intensification, and therefore a mutation, of widespread cultural and economic logic” (Tiziana Terranova, 2000, p.54). Internet pornography, in as much as it is multiply-mediated through American companies like PornHub, Tumblr, or even AT&T, to name but a few, still function as brick and mortar institutions of capital, employing the same surveillance and methods of oppression and commodification which are merely hidden under novel modalities. As Ferguson (2004) brilliantly illustrates, capital “calls for the subjects who must transgress the material ideological boundaries of community, family,

and nation;” and as surplus affective laborers, producing surplus value, such subjects “become the impetus for anxieties about the sanctity” of all that heteronormativity holds dear, this identifying “the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality intersect within capitalist political economies and shape the conditions of capital’s existence” (p. 17). At the same time that they offer ruptures through which to critically engage the contradictions of the state—and that in addition to the substantive empowerment in circulation, should not and cannot be undermined or made irrelevant—user/producers of internet pornography must rely on a technology that is, ultimately, part and parcel of a system whose only impulse and manner of citizen-making, or acceptance, comes always at the cost of an Other, that other most often being the dehumanized enemy of US imperialist exigency.<sup>49</sup> In that manner, internet pornography performs a kind of utopia that the state, that industries of capital, have no interest in sustaining or actualizing outside of the manner in which they establish an exceptional *vision* of the U.S. or open up spaces for new consumer categories—a set of subjects assembled under a common identity claim with the potential, through innovative marketing, to engender an additional market base (Chandan Reddy, 2011; C. Riley Snorton, 2017).

There is nothing exceptionally cruel about the above observation. Porn consumption works within and through the same logic of all neoliberal order. That is to say, “the freedom it proposes is a technique by which individuals are induced to constitute themselves in approved forms” (Maddison, 2010, p.25). By demarcating sexuality “to the sphere of economic enfranchisement” we isolate freedom from its

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<sup>49</sup> Which oddly, and ominously, recalls what is probably the most infamous quote from serial killer, Richard Ramirez: “Big deal. Death comes with the territory. See you in Disneyland.”

material realities and reformulate it as an “acquisition of new skills and responsibilities in relation to the exercise of sexual techniques and tastes” (p. 25). And that’s just the point: its everydayness under neoliberal capital, as Berlant illustrates. Porn consumers are everyday affective subjects navigating affects’ overflows within capitalist worlds that produce them not as epiphenomena but as a matter of neoliberal sociogenesis. The surplus labor of capturing those overflows and placing them into a novel form of circulation falls most heavily, of course, on the shoulders of the as of yet incurably non-normative, the not yet citizens awaiting their placement in capital’s hierarchies. As many of my participants articulated in their idiosyncratic ways, porn consumption serves a kind of amelioration to modernity’s demands of perennial sexual exuberance and claiming-in-order-to-be-recognized of a core sexual self. At the same time, pornography as an industry of paid labor—in the case of commercial—or free labor—in the case of some amateur/DIY/realcore—often capitalizes on fetishized forms, which many of my participants, college educated as they are, can work through, but never without meeting some ill resonances. Peter expressed this felt conundrum in discussing their consumption of trans pornography (not to be conflated with the amateur non-binary porn they consume through Tumblr): “I find it difficult to consume, because I don’t wanna participate in this fetish. But it also brings a relief to my life that other people can feel happiness even when they’re feeling the same things I am.” While pornography consumption reveals, and thereby ruptures, spaces from which to glean queer utopias—as Muñoz (2009) articulates, pasts that possibly never were or futures perennially deferred—it cannot in and of itself articulate, or speak back to a heteronormative and capitalist biopower that one, only capacitates the existence of queer digital spaces in as much as they generate

capital and, two, *creates the need* for a subject to proclaim a sexual identity in order for the state to decide on the subject's value and capacity to bear rights.

## CHAPTER 5

### ASYMMETRIES

#### WHITE DESIRE, HETERONORMATIVITY, AND TOXIC AFFECTS

##### WHAT THE HELL IS WATER?

While I have illuminated the roles that multimodal affects play in porn consumption under those conditions already set in place by heteronormativity and neoliberal capitalism, I have only briefly touched on heteronormativity-as-whiteness and its concomitant affects. Before tending to my conclusion, it stands to reason that I should attempt to clarify how whiteness became constructed along with heteronormativity and nationalism, as well as where I find its discourses on the policing of pleasures, even at the level of fantasy, to be most apparent today. This will help to clarify how all of my participants are bound to its policing and why most feel a desire to be proximal to the same ideologies that simultaneously exclude(ed) them. As a point of entry into the analysis to come, I first turn to Rob, who did not show the same critical engagement with his whiteness or sexuality that Mike, Peter, and Johto did in the previous chapter. This of course illustrates one way that gendered, raced, and sexual privileges or exclusions are intertwined rather than exclusive or separable.

While not obvious, there is a reason why Rob candidly stated the following: “Yea, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a video that wasn’t white. And that seems like such a white supremacist thing to say.” There are two cases to which I attend here: 1) *that* he has never seen non-white porn, even though this did not occur intentionally and 2) *that* he imagines this could be an *act* of white supremacy. In some cases unwittingly, yet

concomitant with privilege, whiteness often overlooks taken for granted benefits that occur only within colonial/racial hierarchies (Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 2007; Wekker, 2016). That is, it is often the case that whiteness—particularly in its entanglements with a neoliberal formulation of the self—wrongly delimits racism to an *active* realm in which racial hierarchies only occur and exist within interpersonal moments of intentional prejudice. Moreover, just as the colonial referent system marks whiteness as the universal or transparent subject (Hortense J. Spillers, 2003; Andrea Smith, 2016; Wekker, 2016), wherein whiteness escapes adjectival placement, pornography, working within this system as well, also categorizes all pornography of color through racial adjectival enhancement. Using Rob’s case to flesh this out, when he searches “amateur porn” within PornHub, he gets videos of *white* amateur porn not through a lack of Black or Asian or Latinx amateur porn, but through the manner in which one must enhance the category by specifying race. Meaning, while whites can simply *be* amateurs, maids, cheerleaders, DILFs, MILFs, hoes, or whatever the pornographic trope, performers of color can only be a racialized form of that thing. That Rob thinks he has somehow *performed* an act of white supremacy without having tried reveals the success of extant white supremacy’s opacity. White supremacy is a living, breathing system. It is the water in which we all swim and somehow cannot recognize or refuse to recognize. Such misrecognition or, better stated, erasure of the state’s—and all of its concomitant technologies of discipline and control—historical nascence entails an obscuring of passive forms of white supremacy, that which is pointed to in the modern use of “white privilege,” and a false belief that white supremacy only exists in moments of action from individual actors. And it is for that reason in particular that I embark on

an historical analysis, augmented by queer of color and postcolonial lenses, of the social construction of American male heterosexuality.

*American (White) Heterosexual Men: National Affects*

Foucault's (1978) canonical works, *The History of Sexuality*, reveals how sex "is historically subordinate to sexuality" (p. 157). To clarify this proposition, in volume 3, *The Care of the Self*, Foucault goes through great lengths in order to expose the genealogy of what became a Christian sexual ethic, namely, the one-to-one correspondence of one's sexuality and objects of desire—or, "unification of erotics"—that finds its origins in Plutarch's *Dialogues* (pp. 199-209). That is, it is first in the naming and stipulating of sexuality types that sex—not one's biological category but the sex that one has with another or multiple others—becomes at all a point of concern.

That being said, while Foucault's paradigm remains invaluable for analyses of the sexual formation of white subjects, the same cannot be said for that of nonwhite subjects whose place in sociology's "production of racial knowledge" has been used "to justify the extension and support of normative presumptions about American citizenship" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 81), which has been and continues to be framed by whiteness. Through queer of color and native studies interventions, modulations, and critiques we not only understand sexuality as a social construction, we understand how sexuality emerges as a modern and colonial ideology that is not without its ambiguities, exceptions, and contradictions. As Héctor Carrillo (2002) shows in his study of sexuality in Guadalajara, what separates a homosexual from a heterosexual in Guadalajara—its deep entanglement with gender performance, rather than who you fuck and how often—does



not map onto how Americans mark that distinction—who you fuck. It is pointless to exhaust such works, or even paraphrase those that I may deem most significant because, for this project, rather than making nonwhite and/or nonhetero and/or noncisgender lives legible—or their porn consumption for that matter—I want to illustrate why they are not legible to heteronormativity in the first place. That is, we must take a moment to review the construction of heterosexuality in the US as a specific address to white middle-class citizens. To accomplish this task, I primarily draw on Kevin White’s (1993) seminal work, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America*, with the added understanding that the socially constructed and modern male sexuality to which Kevin White refers is that of white men, as people of color, especially at the historical time upon which White concentrates his research, 1900-1930, were hardly or not at all recognized as sexual agents or legitimate citizens; nor could they meet the economic standards.

Through the advent of television and marketing at the turn of the twentieth century, the US had become a “visual culture” in which “one did not merely buy a product but with it success, power, health, and beauty” (p. 20). For the first time in Euro-American culture, men were pressed to embody a sex appeal that, in these formative years of the consumerist self-making we now take for granted, could only be achieved through the purchasing of skin products, body odor product, hair products, mouth hygiene products, muscle building products, and general accoutrements, all of which was concomitantly being invented and introduced. Of course, masculinity being a hegemony, as it was in the Victorian era, all such products could be purchased while holding to a promise of “stylishness but not at the cost of effeminacy” (p. 26). Even so, what was

being marketed, to whom, and who could afford it spawned two class levels of sexual masculine identity: the Christian Gentlemen—middle-class masculinity—and the Bohemian Tramp—lower-class masculinity.

As White convincingly argues, where once men were judged by a “culture of character,” men were now judged by a purchasable/consumable “culture of personality” (p. 37). That is, masculinity (read as white), in its new hegemonic formulation, was both a performance and transitive property that both the Christian Gentleman and the Bohemian attained through external consumable objects. Jack Halberstam—published under Judith Halberstam (1998) at the time—notes as much within late 20<sup>th</sup> century formulations of hegemonic (read: white) masculinity in his discussion on James Bond’s externally produced masculinity, wherein Bond is rendered painfully boring and insignificant without his gadgets and always-available women. Returning to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the 1910s “a public ethic that emphasized heterosexual sexual expression ... performance ... and male potency ... gained ascendancy” (White, 1993, p. 57). Far from coincidence, then, “the period after WWI featured open and mass market erotica ... on an unprecedented and recognizably modern scale, facilitated by modern mass production and marketing techniques” (p. 60).

Concurrent with the social-qua-corporate construction of male-qua-cisman potency whose proper object was females-qua-ciswomen, English sexologist Havelock Ellis, began using “heterosexuality”<sup>50</sup> to denote male/female pairing, reproduction,

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<sup>50</sup> Even before Ellis’s deployment of the word, “heterosexuality” had undergone many inconsistent if not ironic mutations. In a letter to Karl Ulrichs, a German rights activist who stood in opposition to the introduction of a Prussian law that criminalized sexual relations between males, Hungarian journalist and humanist, Karl-Maria Kertbeny introduced the word “heterosexual.” This novel and not quite defined term was later picked up and employed by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

eroticism, and love (Blank 2012). In positivist logic, there had to be an opposite. Which is to say, not until heterosexuality became a state and corporate constructed standard of embodiment, did what was being labeled as “homosexual” acts come to define a whole person. Middle class educated individuals were soon put on the defenses to ensure their distance from the homosexual, which was being constructed in its relation to masculine ideals—read: presumed heterosexual—in which any signs of impotency or effeminacy marked one as proximal to or potentially homosexual (White, 1993). Needing to prove this, in as much as magazines, pop psychology, and radio were relaying the exigency—“men were expected now to have acquired new skills in bed ... they were encouraged more and more to be sexual athletes” (pp. 78-79).

Though the men being mobilized toward this nation building and capital producing ideal of heterosexual masculinity were white, there did exist class distinctions. In the dancehall subculture composed of mostly white working class but also working class people of color—more POC than would be found in any middle or upper-class space—a strict binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality was not apparent (Jonathan Katz, 1984; White, 1993), which speaks to the dichotomy as primarily a white and middle-class ontology despite contemporary discourses around homophobia as a lower-class problem. Regardless of that fact, the feminist New Woman, too, was learning newly developed ideologies of modern love in which they had a right to not only enjoy sex with men but demand mutual pleasure. The novelty of such independent

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Ironically, just like Ulrich and Kertbeny, Krafft-Ebing’s work was less concerned with what the heterosexual is—to be sure, this is far before any notion of its universality or fixedness—than how other so-called deviant sexual relations were constructed in relation to it (Hanne Blank, 2012).

women quickly wore off for the new modern man as he found it easier to thrive in a “structured sexuality where the rules were clear. Pure and passive good women made wives while more sexual ‘bad’ women made good mistresses” (p. 126). In this way, ostensible monogamous pairing ideologies could remain intact at the same time that men could meet the new demands of perennial sexual exuberance.

In the “culture of personality” traditions such as the charismatic and genteel Victorian man had been expunged and replaced by a neoliberal ostensible sense of freedom in making one’s self. That is, lacking “guidance from other sources beside peer pressure,” young men “turned to the artifacts of the culture of personality for inspirations, most notably to the movies and to personal advice columnists” (p. 156). Ultimately, white heterosexuality emerged as a culturally-cum-corporately produced hegemony of many paradoxes, including the idea that women are the proper objects of desire for men in two sense: as wives, and as that through which one relieves their sexual athletic duties. But it is only in the sense that both should happen simultaneously—i.e. monogamy and intense mutual erotics, as is proper to any Christian doctrine—that heteronormativity shadows the calling forth of sexuality in order to govern that Foucault notes is a particular staple of modernity.

That ideal heteronormative subject becomes the marker by which the state, who was invested in and a part of its construction, arbitrates its recognition. State recognition entail access to state care, to public space, to community inclusion. Thus, if recognition from the state becomes the only way for a subject to access health care, individual rights, labor rights, tax privileges, and social legibility—and yet a subject’s sexuality, class, ability, and/or race serves as some form of a barrier in its relation to power—then that

subject, in hopes of gaining such access, will highlight other parts of itself that the state is willing to recognize. Contemporarily, this is witnessed in the simultaneous push for gay marriage and public exposure to responsible gay parenthood. Rodríguez (2014) succinctly articulates that as LGBT organizations begin to “seek recognition from the state through a discourse of social responsibility, images of gay and lesbian couples with children nestled between them serve as the visual antidote” to other images and imaginaries of queer practices and performances that mark them as deviant exactly because they do not parallel other heteronormative conditions (p. 35).

Again, porn consumption is already nonnormative and thus represents a space of neoliberal control. However, as discussed in the conclusion of the previous chapter, that control is not enacted through censorship. Rather, control occurs through commodification of erotic affects’ circulation and the manner in which porn serves as a virtual utopia for nonnormative populations. But, it is both normative subjects and nonnormative subjects who learn and must live through heteronormative affects that precede their becoming. So, regarding pornography, what technologies and discourses serve to control that practice, that circulation of erotic affects already at odds with and yet working through heteronormativity? Better yet, how is porn articulated by those most invested in heteronormativity to the nascent sexual subject citizen? I will analyze a part of these discourses in order to better understand the national affective landscape through which all affective subjects attempt not only to survive, but to freely experience an affective intensity so powerful we often denote it as the glue of sociality, friendship, and love. In a word, intimacy.

*Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn as Toxin*

*Good Picture Bad Pictures: Porn Proofing Today's Young Kids* is a peculiar and significant text given its popularity and indisputable commitment to heteronormativity, employing the same tired arguments that antiporn scholars, who have hidden behind the aegis of heteronormativity, have also used. I will extract and analyze what I see as the 3 most telling quotes from this book that is a dialogue between middle class white parents (Mother and Father) and their middle-class white son. I should first note that this book, meant as an all-encompassing preventative measure to porn consumption, employs a young white boy as its universal subject. In that fact alone, boys are marked as naturally more sexual than girls and whiteness the universal gatekeepers of sexuality's flows and expressions. In the first quote I analyze, I show how the book appeals to a heterosexist hermeneutic. The second quote turns toward both monogamy and reproduction. The final example reveals the deployment of addiction models in order to reinforce monogamy, reproduction and, most importantly, the nuclear white family.

After introducing the idea of porn as highly tempting, Mother states, "It all has to do with your two brains ... the feeling brain that doesn't know right from wrong ... and the thinking brain" which "is like a mom who tells a kid to stop eating too much ice cream" (p. 8). Apart from the disturbing invocation to self-policing, it also recalls the patriarchal constructed split between feeling women and thinking men that US feminists first critiqued decades ago. As anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz (1988) aptly articulates the culturally specific sexist attitude: "In identifying emotion primarily with irrationality, subjectivity, the chaotic, and other negative characteristics, and in subsequently labeling

women the emotional gender, cultural belief reinforces the ideological subordination of women” (p. 54).

Confident that she has instilled in her white son the idea that he is naturally logical and thus the world’s emotional (read as irrational and feminine) aegis, Mother further informs him that “if [moms and dads] didn’t fall in love and come together, they wouldn’t have babies. And if they didn’t have babies, the human race might not survive ... which means you wouldn’t be here today!” This is a deployment of “reproductive futurism,” which Lee Edelman (2004, p. 3) shows to be both a mechanism by which the child is rendered eternally innocent and queers—as nonreproductive subjects—as antithetical to civilization, community, the nation itself. Edelman, unfortunately, does not himself point out how that eternally innocent child is presumed white and that even when queers do adopt those ideals (i.e. of whiteness as it has been constructed) of reproduction, middle class mobility, and monogamy—that which Lisa Duggan (2002) coined as homonormative, and recent scholarship, regarding trans bodies calls transnormativity—it is a performance, an embodiment still best succeeded through being white (Ferguson, 2004; Skidmore, 2011).

After a long and awkward afternoon of talking with Mother, the son turns to Father for further explication. As equally concerned about the subject as Mother, Father tells his son that “pornography is a lot like poisonous bait ... At first, [it] can feel exciting to your body. But sooner than you think, it can damage your brain, a lot like poison” (p. 38). Here the father turns to the drug/addiction analogy discussed in my analysis of Gary Wilson’s work. The body as flesh is rendered prone to excessive desires—a kind of evil which one has to inhabit and simultaneously struggle against. A mode of thinking

Foucault notes as flowing within Christian moral practices and the Greek ethical texts from which they are drawn (particularly through Thomas Aquinas's revival of Aristotelian logic). Except, where Greeks stipulated the production of a self against the desiring flesh as a mode of living—i.e. not an ethical valuation of pleasures or erotics, which were not categorized by what was greater or lesser a sin, as virtually no sexual acts were unethical outside of *excessiveness*, but a way to be centered as all things are in their natural state—Christian doctrine stipulated that very same production as “a juridico-moral<sup>51</sup> codification of acts, moments, and intentions that legitimated an activity that was of itself a bearer of negative values” (1985, p. 138).

From *Women Against Pornography* to *GPBP* we see the presupposition of heteronormativity as that which always was and always will/should be—i.e. a universal. Through my analysis of White's text, however, I have pieced together some of the ways it has become a national affective force that has, in forgetting its own historical construction, become a common sense: “When history becomes second nature, the affect seems obvious or literal, as if it follows directly from what has already been given” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37). I have additionally revealed certain discourses in which it is the White middle class boy whose eternal innocence and epistemic access to all truths becomes the gatekeeper of sexuality and sex—inflected as they are by race—for not just women, but all gender/race/sexuality assemblages. White heterosexual, monogamous, middle class man stands as the national monolith of all that is right and true in the world, whose ongoing production is always and already tailor-made to be capacitated through distancing from and dehumanization of an Other, whichever novel Other becomes

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<sup>51</sup> A conflation or convergence of morality with law.



known. It is also clearer now how, as I briefly discussed in chapter 2, heteronormativity is fashioned with an “affective fabric of immunity nationalism” (Chen, 2012, p. 192). It starts with the individual as a neoliberal subject who is oriented toward heteronormativity, and the concomitantly constructed ideal family—and by extension, nation—who “becomes a happy object if we share this orientation” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 38). This means, of course, sharing a complicated and multivalent negative orientation toward pornography. Whiteness as heteronormativity, heteronormativity as whiteness becomes a national affective sphere under which a kind of racial as well as sexual melancholia becomes a structure of everyday life (Muñoz 1999, 2006; David L. Eng & Shinhee Han 2000). Pornography, as discussed, often a performative or amelioration of that racial and/or sexual melancholia, is rendered an affective toxicity in as much it poisons the heteronormative system. And yet, even then, porn consumption reflects a method of neoliberal control.

If not clear, *porn is not the problem*. Heteronormativity within neoliberal capital is. Heterosexuality is itself not an evil, but if we are to understand the real problematic pressures under which it is constantly placed, we must first understand the ways “in which heteronormativity works to support and reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation” (Cathy J. Cohen, 1997, p. 456). How heteronormativity works given its tacit adoption into national common sense is not always apparent. That is why and how Rob, returning to the introduction of this chapter, can passively take part in and benefit from white supremacy without even knowing it or being capable of knowing lest it revealed itself as an active and interpersonal moment. Heteronormativity serves as the most widespread affective inhibitor of porn consumption, not only because it arbitrarily

(outside of consumerism) stipulates good and bad objects of desire, but also because it is an ideology that is invariably tied up with the structures and discourses *responsible* for the demarcations, exclusions, and violences towards those nonnormative subjects who had no choice but to become dividable fetishized objects of consumption and perennial affective laborers.

## CONCLUSION

First, while this work analyzes porn consumption, it makes no claims to what porn does or can mean to performers outside of those users/generators, like Peter, who perform less out of a monetary desire than a community desire of which circulations of nonnormative affects compose the glue. Second, it is my highest hope that each of my participants feel I have treated their narratives fairly and with care. This work is deeply indebted to their careful and candid articulations of something very hard to share with someone who is otherwise a stranger.

As it currently stands, most internet porn does not escape hierarchies of gendered, raced, abled, and classed powers that exist within the state under which it is allowed to function and out of which its affective subjects develop. Yet, through its intense circulation of multimodal erotic affects, even if as asymmetrically dispersed affective labors from nonnormative subjects, internet porn is core to quotidian sexual and queer desire experiences and knowledge making otherwise prohibited in the public sphere if not delimited to the academic world. For that, internet porn is beautiful.

Neither queer nor heterosexuality are stable or exclusive. Heteronormativity, as an ideology, merely masks what heterosexual subjects practice in privacy or among

confidants. All of us, no matter how nonnormative, feel that affective force to align our desire and erotic affects with heteronormativity. Still, sexuality inflected by race performs another mode of self-government, concern, or depression on heterosexuals of color. As with Meeseeks, who had recently learned in a sociology course and thought it prudent to relay in our focus group that he feels he must temper or gage his sexuality to discourses about the hypersexual Latino male. Neither is it much of a wonder, then, why Alphonse, a young Black man who despite his fluid sense of heterosexuality would also relay that he sometimes uses pornography as a method of self-punishment because, as he himself articulated, “it validates more that I could be a terrible human being.” That racial/sexual melancholia at once a byproduct of heteronormativity’s claims to what makes a person a good person weighs on all subjects but is expressed disparately depending on certain vectors within a subjects intersecting relations to power.

The world is everything that is the case. The desires are everything that is the case. Porn is everything that is the case. Consumption of internet porn places in relief that demand of modernity to claim and perform a sexual self all the time. It often serves as the only space where sexual outsiders attain a sense of community and worth. A community and worth that heteronormativity obscures through its capacity as a national biopower, allowing “political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining ... conditions of social belonging” and, thereby, allowing those proximal to the ideal to judge such subjects “whose agency is deemed fundamentally destructive” (Berlant, 2011) p. 109—e.g. raced and gendered sexuality discourses on hypersexual Others, as well as discourses asserting all porn users are porn addicts or potential addicts who will lose the capacity to love and reproduce. In

performing and laying claim to a core sexual self—what appears as a never ending expansion of identity claims—we take part in what has always been the neoliberal state’s construction of sexuality as a thing to be named in order to withhold belonging, deem unworthy of life, mark as rights-bearing at the expense of something else, or be commodified. American companies profit on nonnormative erotic affective labors, even when such performances and affective exchanges are not recognized by the state or are the actual target of debilitation (as in the case of non-filmed, non-copyrighted, non-corporate sex work for survival or by choice). Simultaneously, an affects analysis of participants’ porn consumption narratives show how everyday affective subjects can experience an intense wholeness or veracity of the self as well as a kind of de facto legitimation of and legibility to their subjective object-desire alignment. An ephemeral fulfillment of an affective promise that the subject might learn itself in allowing the current to carry the body toward some end.

There is a cruelty to the fact that sexuality and desire are called forth as core to a subject. Yet, given internet porn’s liminality, its capacitation of nonnormative communities, multimodal intimacies and desires necessary to all lives in all of their diversity, there may be a kind of hope, a kind of affective world building with the potential to overcome ridiculous national affective oppression. It is of course essential to never forget that that potentiality finds its nascence and circulation through the labor of actual bodies—most often nonnormative bodies who face state and social violence regularly—rather than through the companies who profit on that labor.

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