

Amia Srinivasan *The Right to Sex*

*Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (Bloomsbury 2021)

Preface

feminism: a political movement, not a theory

**Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view.**

It is a **political movement to transform the world beyond recognition**. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? **It answers: we do not know; let us try and see.** xi

‘sex’

Feminism begins with a **woman’s recognition that she is a member of a sex class**: that is, a member of a class of people **assigned to an inferior social status on the basis of something called ‘sex’ – a thing that is said to be natural, pre-political, an objective material ground on which the world of human culture is built.** xi

‘sex’, this supposedly natural thing – a cultural thing posing as a natural one

We inspect **this supposedly natural thing, ‘sex’**, only to find that it is **already laden with meaning**.

At birth, bodies are sorted as ‘male’ or ‘female’, though many bodies must be mutilated to fit one category or the other, and many bodies will later protest against the decision that was made.

**This originary division determines what social purpose a body will be assigned.** [...]

**Sex is, then, a cultural thing posing as a natural one.** Sex, which feminists have taught us to distinguish from gender, is **itself already gender in disguise.** xi f.

‘sex’, in another sense: a thing we do with our sexed bodies

**‘sex’**: sex as **a thing we do with our sexed bodies**. Some bodies are for other bodies to have sex with. [...]

‘Sex’ in this second sense is also **said to be a natural thing, a thing that exists outside politics**. Feminism shows that **this too is a fiction**, and a fiction that serves certain interests.

Sex, which we think of as the most private of acts, is **in reality a public thing.** [...]

the rules for all this were set long before we entered the world xii

feminism and sexual freedom

Feminists have long dreamed of **sexual freedom**. What they refuse to accept is **its simulacrum: sex that is said to be free, not because it is equal, but because it is ubiquitous**. In this world, sexual freedom is **not a given but something to be achieved**, and it is **always incomplete**. xii

**What would it take for sex really to be free?** We do not yet know; let us try and see. xiii

sex as a political phenomenon – beyond the narrow parameters of ‘consent’

These essays are **about the politics and ethics of sex in this world**, animated by a hope of a different world.

They reach back to **an older feminist tradition that was unafraid to think of sex as a political phenomenon**, as something **squarely within the bounds of social critique**. The women in this tradition – from Simone de Beauvoir and Alexandra Kollontai to bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Catharine MacKinnon and Adrienne Rich — dare us to think about the ethics of sex **beyond the narrow parameters of ‘consent’**. They compel us to ask **what forces lie behind a woman’s yes**; what it reveals about sex that it is something to which consent must be given; how it is that we have come to put so much psychic, cultural and legal weight on a notion of ‘consent’ that cannot support it.

And they ask us to join them in **dreaming of a freer sex**. xiii

remake the political critique of sex for the twenty-first century

At the same time, these essays seek to **remake the political critique of sex for the twenty-first century**: to take seriously **the complex relationship of sex to race, class, disability, nationality and caste**; to think about what sex has become **in the age of the internet**; to ask what it means to **invoke the power of the capitalist and carceral state** to address the problems of sex. xiii f.

feminism not as ‘home’

Feminism cannot indulge the fantasy that interests always converge; [...]

**Feminism envisaged as a ‘home’ insists on commonality before the fact** [...] A truly inclusionary politics is an uncomfortable, unsafe politics. xv

they [the essays] represent my attempt to put into words what many women, and some men, already know xv

## The Conspiracy Against Men

false rape accusation – and its cultural charge

Nonetheless, a false rape accusation, like a plane crash, is an objectively unusual event that occupies an outsized place in the public imagination.

Why then does it carry its cultural charge? 3

false rape accusation, by men

very often, it is men who falsely accuse other men of raping women. This is a thing almost universally misunderstood about false rape accusations. When we think of a false rape accusation we picture a scorned or greedy woman, lying to the authorities. But many, perhaps most, wrongful convictions of rape result from false accusations levied against men by other men 4

false rape accusations as a predominantly wealthy white male preoccupation

It might seem surprising, then, that false rape accusations are, today, a predominantly wealthy white male preoccupation.

But it isn't surprising – not really. The **anxiety about false rape accusations** is purportedly about injustice (innocent people being harmed), but **actually it is about gender, about innocent men being harmed by malignant women**. It is **an anxiety**, too, **about race and class**: about **the possibility that the law might treat wealthy white men as it routinely treats poor black and brown men**.

1ex For poor men, and women, of colour, the white woman's false rape accusation is just one element in a matrix of vulnerability to state power.

false rape accusations are **a unique instance of middle-class and wealthy white men's vulnerability** to the injustices routinely perpetrated by the carceral state against poor people of colour. 5f.

the representation is false – but, as ideologically efficacious

That representation is, of course, false: even in the case of rape, the state is on the side of wealthy white men.

But what matters in the sense of what is ideologically efficacious – is not the reality, but the misrepresentation. **In the false rape accusation, wealthy white men misperceive their vulnerability to women and to the state.** 6

Brock Turner case (Santa Clara County, 2016)

'20 minutes of action' – healthy, adolescent fun [...]

quotein a sense Dan Turner is talking about an animal, a perfectly bred specimen of wealthy white American boyhood [...]

like an animal, Brock is imagined to exist outside the moral order. These red-blooded, white-skinned, all-American boys [...] are good kids, the best kids, our kids. 7

Brett Kavanaugh

The solidarity on show from the people who knew Kavanaugh when young — what Kavanaugh calls 'friendship' – was the solidarity of rich white people.

We can't imagine a black or brown Kavanaugh without inverting America's racial and economic rules. 9

'Believe women', #IBelieveHer

Whom are we to believe, the white woman who says she was raped, or the black or brown woman who insists that her son is being set up? Carolyn Bryant or Mamie Till? 9

dismissal of 'Believe women' as a category error

a political response to what we suspect will be its [legal principle of the presumption of innocence] uneven application [...]

Against this prejudicial enforcement of the presumption of innocence, 'Believe women' operates as a corrective norm, a gesture of support for those people — women — whom the law tends to treat as if they were lying. 9

a category error in a second sense

The law must address each individual on a case-by-case basis [...] but the norms of the law do not set the norms of rational belief. Rational belief is proportionate to the evidence [...]

the outcome of a trial does not determine what we should believe 10

why sex crimes elicit such selective scepticism?

The question, from a feminist perspective, is **why sex crimes elicit such selective scepticism.**

And the answer that feminists should give is that **the vast majority of sex crimes are perpetrated by men against women.**

Sometimes, the injunction to 'Believe women' is simply the injunction to form our beliefs in the ordinary way: in accordance with the facts. 10f.

Does 'Believe women' serve justice at Colgate [University, elite liberal arts college; 4.2 per cent of the student body black in the academic year 2013-14; yet 50 per cent of accusations of sexual violation against black students]? 11

Jyoti Singh, 16 December 2012, Delhi

the brutality of the attack on Jyoti Singh was cited by non-Indians as a way of disavowing any commonality between the sexual cultures of India and their own countries. [...]

A first question: why is it that when white men rape they are violating a norm, but when brown men rape they are conforming to one?

A second question: if Indian men are hyenas, what does that make Indian women? 12

the spectacle of the black male corpse, v/ the lack of the spectacle of the black female corpse

'What,' Threadcraft asks, 'will motivate people to rally around the bodies of our black female dead?' 14

the white mythology about black sexuality

portraying black men as rapists and black women as unrapeable 14

the doubled sexual subordination of black women

- Black women who speak out against black male violence are blamed for reinforcing negative stereotypes of their community and for calling on a racist state to protect them.

- At the same time, the internalisation of the sexually precocious black girl stereotype means that black girls and women are seen by some black men as asking for their abuse. 14

Clarence Thomas v/ Anita Hill

Fairfax did not note the irony of comparing black women to a white lynch mob.

Neither did Clarence Thomas, for that matter, when he accused Anita Hill in 1991 of triggering a 'high-tech lynching'.

**The very logic that made the lynching of black men possible – the logic of black hypersexuality – is repurposed, at the level of metaphor, to falsely indict black women as the true oppressors. 15**

intersectionality's central insight: the danger of a lib movement's serving the least suppressed members of a group

**'Intersectionality'** – a term coined by **Kimberlé Crenshaw** to name an idea first articulated by an older generation of feminists from Claudia Jones to Frances M. Beal, the Combahee River Collective, Selma James, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez and Cherríe Moraga – is **often reduced**, in common understanding, **to a due consideration of the various axes of oppression and privilege: race, class, sexuality, disability and so on.** But to reduce intersectionality to a mere attention to difference is to forego its power as a theoretical and practical orientation.

**The central insight of intersectionality is that any liberation movement – feminism, anti-racism, the labour movement – that focuses only on what all members of the relevant group (women, people of colour, the working class) have in common is a movement that will best serve those members of the group who are least oppressed. 17**

the dilemma of 'Believe women'

When we are too quick to believe a white woman's accusation against a black man, or a Brahmin woman's accusation against a Dalit man, it is black and Dalit women who are rendered more vulnerable to sexual violence. Their ability to speak out against the violence they face from men of their race or caste is stifled, and their status as counterpart to the oversexed black or Dalit male is entrenched. In that paradox of female sexuality, such women are rendered unrapeable, and thus more rapeable. 18

#MeToo, or, the rules changed suddenly

This idea – that the rules have suddenly changed on men, so that they now face punishment for behaviour that was once routinely permitted – has become a #MeToo commonplace. 20

#MeToo is often seen as having produced a generalised version of the situation in which John Cogan found himself. Patriarchy has lied to men about what is and is not OK, in sex and in gender relations as a whole. Men are now being caught out and unfairly punished for their innocent mistakes, as women enforce a new set of rules. Perhaps these new rules are the correct ones; and, doubtless, the old ones caused a lot of harm. But how were men to have known any better? In their minds they weren't guilty, so don't they too have grounds for acquittal? 21

the example of the "Shitty Media Men" list (2017) 22ff.

What does it really take to alter the mind of patriarchy?

And yet, if the aim is not merely to punish male sexual domination but to end it, feminism must address questions that many feminists would rather avoid: whether a carceral approach that systemically harms poor people and people of colour can serve sexual justice; whether the notion of due process – and perhaps too the presumption of innocence – should apply to social media and public accusations; whether punishment produces social change.

What does it really take to alter the mind of patriarchy? 24

Kwadwo Bonsu, University of Massachusetts, 2014 case (24ff.) – an expectation already internalised

She kept going for the reason that so many girls and women keep going: because women who sexually excite men are supposed to finish the job. It doesn't matter whether Bonsu himself had this expectation, because it is **an expectation already internalised by many women**. A woman going on with a sex act she no longer wants to perform, knowing she can get up and walk away but knowing at the same time that this will make her **a blue-balling tease**, an object of male contempt: **there is more going on here than mere ambivalence, unpleasantness and regret**. 27f.

a kind of coercion, by the informal regulatory system of gendered sexual expectations

There is also **a kind of coercion**: not directly by Bonsu, perhaps, but **by the informal regulatory system of gendered sexual expectations**. Sometimes the price for violating these expectations is steep, even fatal.

That is why there is a connection between these episodes of 'ordinary' sex and the 'actual wrongs and harms' of sexual assault. What happened at UMass may well be 'ordinary' in the statistical sense – as in what happens every day – but it isn't 'ordinary' in the ethical sense, as in what we should pass over without comment. In that sense it is **an extraordinary phenomenon with which we are all too familiar**. 28

California SB 967, the 'Yes Means Yes' bill, 2014: 'affirmative consent' –

How to formulate a regulation that prohibits the sort of sex that is produced by patriarchy?

As Catharine MacKinnon has pointed out, affirmative consent laws simply shift the goalposts on what constitutes legally acceptable sex: whereas previously men had to stop when women said no, now they just have to get women to say yes.

**How do we formulate a regulation that prohibits the sort of sex that is produced by patriarchy?**

Could the reason that this question is so hard to answer be that the law is simply the wrong tool for the job? 29

a feminism worth having – avoid re-enactment of crime and punishment

I am not saying that feminism has no business asking better of men – indeed, asking them to be better men. But **a feminism worth having must find ways of doing so that avoid rote re-enactment of the old form of crime and punishment, with its fleeting satisfactions and predictable costs**.

I am saying that a feminism worth having must, not for the first time, expect women to be better – not just fairer, but more imaginative – than men have been. 30

the genre that Jia Tolentino calls 'My Year of Being Held Responsible for My Own Behavior' 31

## Talking to My Students About Porn

### Did porn kill feminism?

That's one way of telling the story of the US women's liberation movement [...]

Debates about **porn** –

- is it **a tool of patriarchy**, [**a technique of subordination**,] or
- [**a counter to sexual repression**,] **an exercise of free speech**?

– came to preoccupy the women's liberation movement in the US, and to some degree the UK and Australia, and then to tear it apart. 33

**Barnard Sex Conference**, NYC, April 24, 1982 (presented as the annual Scholar and Feminist Conference IX):

Carole S. Vance, "CONCEPT PAPER: Towards a Politics of Sexuality" (January, 1982)

In the conference's concept paper, 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality', Carole Vance called for an acknowledgement of sex as 'simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency'. 33

the 'porn question', settled

the internet has settled the 'porn question' for us 35

'porn', as in: 'problematic' sex in general

**porn** came to serve, for feminists of an earlier generation, as a metonym for '**problematic sex in general**: for sex that took no account of women's pleasure, for sadomasochistic sex, for prostitution, for rape fantasies, for sex without love, for sex across power differentials, for sex with men. 35

Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (1993) — porn as a mechanism not just for depicting the world, but for making it; porn's world-making power

To say that it is porn's function to *effectuate* its message is to see **porn as a mechanism not just for depicting the world, but for making it**.

Porn, for MacKinnon and other anti-porn feminists, was a machine for the production and reproduction of an ideology which, by eroticising women's subordination, thereby made it real. 38

black feminists — mainstream porn's canonical female persona: 'the demure slut'

They identified the template for mainstream pornography in the historical display of black women's bodies in the contexts of colonialism and slavery [...]

In her classic *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins identified a precursor to the white female pornographic object in **the mixed-race slave women who were specifically 'bred' to be indistinguishable from white women**.

These women '**approximated the images of beauty, asexuality, and chastity forced on white women**,' Collins wrote, **but 'inside was a highly sexual whore, a "slave mistress" ready to cater to her owner's pleasure.**' It is from this racialised and gendered practice, Collins suggested, that **mainstream porn got its canonical female persona: the demure slut**. 38f.

But what if the true significance of the perspective of anti-porn feminists lay not in what they were paying attention to, but when?

What if they weren't hysterical, but prescient? 39f.

my students

Could it be that pornography doesn't merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said.

Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to hear those protests? Yes, they said.

Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalisation of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said, yes to all of it. 40

'But if it weren't for pornography,' one woman said, 'how would we ever learn to have sex?' 40

a script in place: sex for my students is what porn says it is

My students would not have stolen or passed around magazines or videos, or gathered glimpses here and there. For them sex was there, fully formed, fully interpreted, **fully categorised** — *teen, gangbang, MILF, stepdaughter* — **waiting on the screen**.

By the time my students got around to sex IRL — later, it should be noted, than teenagers of previous generations — there was, at least for the straight boys and girls, **a script in place** that dictated not only the physical moves and gestures and sounds to make and demand, but also **the appropriate affect, the appropriate desires, the appropriate distribution of power**.

**The psyches of my students are products of pornography.**

In them, the warnings of the anti-porn feminists seem to have been belatedly realised: **sex for my students is what porn says it is**. 41

Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Words*:

the consumers want to live out the pornography further in three dimensions [...] — using and making pornography is inextricable to these acts 42

the porn watcher

a startling image: porn as a virtual training ground for male sexual aggression. Could it be true?

**Or is this image itself a kind of sexual fantasy, which reduces misogyny to a single origin, and its many, diverse agents to a single subject: the porn watcher?** 42

What will the world look like once another generation or two has passed, when every person on Earth will have come of age sexually in the pornworld? 44

porn as the normative standard of sex

*You're doing it wrong*. Porn was for this young man **the normative standard of sex**, against which his girlfriend was measured and found wanting.

Porn is not pedagogy, yet it **often functions as if it were**. 44



Is it porn's responsibility to tell the truth?

Porn may tell lies about sex and women — in John Stoltenberg's famous formula, **'pornography tells lies about women' but 'tells the truth about men'** — but so what?

**Is it porn's responsibility to tell people, especially young people, the truth about sex?** 45

anti-porn feminism: porn itself an act of subordinating women

Crucial to anti-porn feminism is the thought that porn doesn't just happen to result in women's subordination: **it is itself an act of subordinating women**. Specifically, pornography performs the speech act of licensing the subordination of women, and conferring on women an inferior civic status. Like the stampede that follows my shouting 'Fire!', **porn's effects on women are not just, anti-porn feminists think, the expected result, but moreover the whole point, of pornography.** 46

the appeal to childhood innocence

The **appeal to childhood innocence** also tends to draw an implausibly sharp distinction between the way things were and the way things are now, skating over the continuities: between the Rolling Stones and Miley Cyrus, between top-shelf magazines and Pornhub, between making out in the back row and the dick pic.

What's more, it is arguably the rest of us, and **not today's teenagers and young adults, who are under-equipped to deal with the technological renovation of our social world**. By this I don't just mean that kids are the ones who most easily **grasp the semiotic possibilities of TikTok and Instagram**.

I also mean that they have **a sensitivity to the workings of gendered and racialised power that outstrips anything seen before in the political mainstream**. It would be a mistake to assume that they are unable to cope with the pornworld just because we believe that we, as children, couldn't have coped.

Like the anti-porn feminists of the second wave, perhaps my students attribute too much power to porn, and have too little faith in their ability to resist it. 47f.

Peggy Orenstein, *Girls & Sex. Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (HarperCollins 2017).

They [the young women Orenstein discusses in *Girls & Sex*] would not have been ashamed, as I and all my friends were, to call themselves feminists. **How should we understand the relation between this raised state of feminist consciousness among young women, and what appear to be their worsening sexual conditions: increased objectification, intensified body expectations, decreasing pleasure, and shrinking options for sex on their terms?**

Perhaps girls and young women are becoming more feminist because their worsening circumstances demand it.

Or perhaps, as Orenstein suggests, feminist consciousness is for many young women a mode of false consciousness, which plays into the hands of the very system of sexual subordination they take themselves to be opposing.

Does a discourse of sexual empowerment and autonomy mask something darker and un-free? 49

The situation Orenstein described was, they [seventeen-year-old girls at a London school] said, their own: a life of sex without dating, where girls gave and boys received, and where a discourse of empowerment and body confidence masked a deeper sense of disappointment and shame. 50

## pornography as speech

To say that pornography is speech is, in a liberal jurisdiction such as the US, to say that porn is deserving of special protection.

Freedom of speech is connected to many things liberal societies value (or claim to): individual autonomy, the democratic accountability of the government, the sanctity of personal conscience, tolerance of difference and disagreement, the pursuit of truth.

In the US speech is given unusually strong protection, and the notion itself 'speech' — is interpreted with unusual breadth. 52

## free speech, restricted only by form, not by content

While this viewpoint [sc. burning crosses] might be a rent, [sc. Supreme Court justice] Scalia [sc. re St Paul Bias-Motivated Crime Ordinance, 1992] reasoned, it was **still a viewpoint**, whose expression must therefore be protected. The only permissible restrictions on speech were grounded, Scalia insisted, on the *form* that speech took – for example, knowingly false speech (libel, defamation), or speech that involved the criminal abuse of children for its production (child pornography).

Racist or sexist speech could not be prohibited or suppressed on the grounds of its content, for then the state would be intervening in **the free marketplace of ideas**. [...]

in the 'debate' between white supremacists and black people over racial equality, the state couldn't take sides 53

## the mainstream pornographers' right to express their viewpoint

A similar argument was mobilised by judges and legal scholars against the Dworkin-MacKinnon anti-porn ordinances. The legislation, they argued, violated the right of mainstream pornographers to express their viewpoint that women were objects for the sexual use of men.

Since the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinances did not target all pornographic material, but only pornographic material that subordinated women by presenting them as dehumanised sexual objects, it discriminated on the basis of content rather than form. In the debate between misogynists and feminists over women's equality, the state couldn't take sides.

## MacKinnon's rebuttal

First, porn's 'contribution' to the debate about women's status precludes the possibility of women's entering the debate on equal terms. [...]

The exercise of pornographers' right to free speech undermines women's own right to free speech. 53

Second, MacKinnon argued, pornography doesn't merely express the view that women are to be subordinated — it is not 'only words'. By training our attention on porn and its worldly effects, we can come to see it as **an act of subordination, whose function is to enforce the second-class status of all women in relation to men**. The very fact that judges, lawyers and philosophers insist on **treating porn as a question of free speech — as a question of what porn says rather than what it does** — betrays their implicitly male perspective, their failure to see porn as many women see it. 54

## 'free speech' as an ideological tool — the distinction speech v/ action

**'Free speech'**, which poses as a merely formal principle of adjudication, is in fact, MacKinnon suggests, **an ideological tool** selectively deployed to protect the freedoms of the dominant class.

(This is something that the feminist philosophers who have sought to elaborate and defend MacKinnon's argument generally miss: **the issue, for MacKinnon, is not that pornography really is, metaphysically speaking, an action rather than mere speech, but that the very distinction between speech and action is political all the way down.**) 54

*R. v. Butler*, Ontario, 1992. 54f.

feminism x the state x the New Right

The early feminist campaigns against porn in the 1960s took direct action against the makers and sellers of porn in the form of boycotts and protests. By contrast, the antiporn campaigners of the early 1980s called on the power of the state. [...]

Should it have come as a surprise when the state, under the cover of feminism, acted to further the subordination of women and sexual minorities?

This question had a particular significance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the US anti-porn feminists were campaigning.

The decision of the US Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) to legalise abortion represented a significant victory for feminism,

but also led to an organised right-wing backlash which united, to determining and lasting effect, religious conservatives with proponents of neoliberal economics.

Central to the New Right's ideological programme was a reversal of feminist achievements: not just the legalisation of abortion, but also the availability of contraception and birth control, sex education, gay and lesbian rights, and women's mass entry into the workforce.

In this climate, radical feminist critiques of pornography dovetailed with a conservative ideology which made a distinction between 'bad' women (sex workers, 'welfare queens') who must be disciplined by the state and 'good' women who needed its protection, and which saw men as naturally rapacious and in need of taming by the institutions of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family. [...]

It was Ronald Reagan, the lodestar of the New Right, who as president ordered his attorney general to conduct an investigation into the harms of pornography, to which MacKinnon and Dworkin gave expert testimony. 55f.

UK 2014 legislation, ban on non-normative pornographic acts

what is officially sanctioned here, by virtue of being left off the list, is the most mainstream porn, the porn that turns most people on.

But the whole point of the feminist critiques of porn was **to disrupt the logic of the mainstream: to suggest that what turns most people on is not thereby OK**. To prohibit only what is marginal in sex is to reinforce the hegemony of mainstream sexuality: to reinforce mainstream misogyny. 58

porn is going to be made

Whatever the law says, porn is going to be made, bought and sold. [?!]

What should matter most to feminists is not what the law says about porn, but what the law does for and to the women who work in it. 62

the internet cannot be contained

Not one of my students, in the now several years I have been teaching seminars on porn, has suggested using legislation to mitigate its effects. This isn't because my students are free speech fanatics. It's because **they are pragmatists. They instinctively know that the internet cannot be contained**, and that blocking access to it may work on members of older, less savvy generations, but not on theirs. 62

legislate or educate?

In their [my students'] view, porn has the power to teach them the truth about sex not because the state has failed to legislate, but because the state has failed in its basic responsibility to educate. 62

**'porn literacy'** (UK) 62

the appeal to the law, the appeal to education 63

porn trains

sex education, traditionally conceived [sc. asking the educated to deliberate, question and understand], does not propose to meet porn on its own ground.

**For porn does not inform, or persuade, or debate. Porn trains.** It etches deep grooves in the psyche, forming powerful associations between arousal and selected stimuli, bypassing that part of us which pauses, considers, thinks. 64

the pornworld

In front of the porn film, the imagination halts and gives way, overtaken by its simulacrum of reality. The browser window is transformed into a window onto the world, **the porn-world**, in which slick bodies fuck and are fucked for their own pleasure. 64

the porn film *as* film: the pleasures of looking and listening

The pleasures afforded by the porn film *as* a film are those afforded by any other: **the pleasures of looking and listening.** 64

mainstream porn, the pleasures of ego-identification

Except that, in reality, there is no pornworld and no window onto it, and there is nothing incidental about the pleasures we take from porn. **Porn is an elaborate construction designed to get the viewer off.** That the sex in it might be real, and that the pleasure sometimes is too, doesn't change this.

Obviously, mainstream porn offers **the pleasures of looking at the woman's body on display**, its orifices, one by one, awaiting penetration: mouth, vagina, anus.

But, more than this, it offers **the pleasures of ego-identification.** For mainstream porn depicts a very particular kind of sexual schema in which, on the whole, women are hungry for the assertion of male sexual power — and then assigns to the viewer a particular focus of identification within it. **64f.**

the woman viewer

Where is the woman viewer in all this? [...]

what porn does or doesn't do for the women who watch it 65

salutary possibilities in sexual objectification

there may be salutary possibilities in sexual objectification [...]

there might be something salutary in identifying, in the case of rape porn, with the actress who willingly consents to a performance of non-consensual sex 66

re mainstream porn featuring black women

For, Nash says, such depictions [sc. mainstream porn featuring black women] can ‘represent blackness as a locus of pleasure and sexual arousal’ for both the white male and black female viewer.

(**Absence from porn might be as much a sign of oppression as presence:** is the fact that there is relatively little porn fetishising Native American, Aboriginal or Dalit women evidence that they are *not* oppressed?) 66

re mainstream gay male porn

Green argues that it can nonetheless give gay men — for whom being denied the status of sexually desirable objects is a **‘motif experience’** — ‘a robust sense of their own objectivity’.

Without such a sense, Green says, a male ‘gay sexuality still can be spiritual, political or intellectual. What it cannot be is hot, wet or fun.’ 66

Anti-porn feminists are too confident in their assumption that images of sexual and racial domination on screen can do nothing but exacerbate sexual and racial domination off the screen.

The simplicity of this picture is undone, not least, by the notoriously unruly unconscious: who can be sure what it will make of what the conscious mind deems ‘good’ and ‘bad’?

That said, it is **interesting how few if any pro-porn theorists suggest that men who watch rape porn identify with the raped woman**, or that white men who watch interracial porn identify with the black woman. 67

Why does the fem gay man or black woman need to watch someone who looks like them be bent over and fucked to know that they, in their femness or blackness, are desirable?

I am not saying the need is not real, or that sexist and racist porn cannot be repurposed to serve it.

I am asking **why the need exists in the first place**, and what it tells us about how far the power of porn can be subverted or diverted.

I am asking that we do not confuse the necessities of negotiation under oppression with the signs of emancipation. 67

pornographic mainstream

I am also asking that we **don’t discount the power of the pornographic mainstream**. 67

recherché v/ strong trends, through-lines

The internet meme ‘Rule 34’ states ‘If it exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions.’ [...] Even on the biggest porn sites one can find things to suit *recherché* or even politically refreshing tastes [...]

But that doesn’t mean that the p world is a place of free idiosyncratic desire and personal kink. **Porn, like all cultural forms, has strong trends and through-lines**. 67

algorithms (on free mainstream porn sites, like PornHub)

the **algorithm** gives users what others in their demographic like to watch, **bringing their sexual tastes into conformity**. What’s more, the algorithm **teaches users to think about sex itself in prescribed categories**. [...]

She [Shira Tarrant] adds: ‘Online-porn users don’t necessarily realize that **their porn-use patterns are largely molded by a corporation**.’ 68

Porn is powerful. 68

feminist and indie queer porn

What they offer, in a sense, is an alternative form of sex education, which seeks to reveal, and revel in, the sexiness of bodies, acts and distributions of power that do not conform to heterosexual, racist and ableist erotic standards. 68

Candida Royalle, *Femme Productions*, since 1984.

Erika Lust, porn director, producer, Barcelona.

Shine Louise Houston, black queer porn director, *The Crash Pad* (2005), CrashPadSeries.com

The actors in Houston's online series, CrashPadSeries.com, describe themselves variously as non-binary butch femmes, witches, trans lesbians, transdykes, 'non-human women', bears, genderqueer unicorns, butch futch trans girl enby dykes, sex nerds, and ftM sadist sexual omnivores. The episodes are accompanied by content warnings (in the case of 'consensual nonconsensual sex') and 'behind the scenes' footage in which the actors debrief after shooting. 69

It's easy to forget, but in almost all mainstream porn men have real orgasms and women fake it. 69

the argument for better, more diverse representations of sex — v/ the logic of the screen?

The demand for better representation leaves in place **the logic of the screen**, according to which **sex must be mediated** [?!]; and **the imagination is limited to imitation** [?!], riffing on what it has already absorbed.

Perhaps, today, the logic of the screen is inescapable [?!]. If that is so, then 'better representation' is indeed the best we can hope for. 70

something lost?

But something is lost here. While filmed sex seemingly opens up a world of sexual possibility, all too often it shuts down the sexual imagination, making it weak, dependent, lazy, codified. The sexual imagination is transformed into **a mimesis-machine** [?!], incapable of generating its own novelty. 70

Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (1987): imagination v/ sexual fantasy

**Imagination** is not a synonym for **sexual fantasy**, which is only pathetically — a programmed tape loop repeating repeating in the narcoleptic mind. Imagination finds new meanings, new forms; complex and empathetic values and acts. The person with imagination is pushed forward by it into a world of possibility and risk, a distinct world of meaning and choice; not into a nearly bare junkyard of symbols manipulated to evoke rote responses. 70f.

a kind of negative education

If sex education sought to endow young people not just with better 'rote responses' but with an emboldened sexual imagination — the capacity to bring forth 'new meanings, new forms' — it would have to be, I think, **a kind of negative education**.

It wouldn't assert its authority to tell the truth about sex, but rather remind young people that the authority on what sex is, and could become, lies with them. [...]

Rather than more speech or more images, it is **their onslaught that would have to be arrested** [?!].

Perhaps then the sexual imagination could be coaxed, even briefly, to recall its lost power. 71

## Coda: The Politics of Desire

Elliot Rodger case

But the kind of diagnosis Rodger offered, in which racism and the norms of heteromasculinity placed him beyond desirability, need not in principle be wrong. Racism and heteronormativity do extend into the sphere of romance and sex; indeed it is in this intimate sphere, protected by the logic of 'personal preference', that they sink some of their deepest roots.

Did feminists not have anything to say about this? 94

But is it 'as banal as it gets' to observe that what is ugliest about our social realities — racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity shapes whom we do and do not desire and love, and who does and does not desire and love us? [...]

the more hidden, private mechanisms that enable and partly constitute it [the oppression of the people of colour and the working-class, queer and disabled people], including the mechanisms of the club, the dating app, the bedroom, the school dance 95

the feminist project to liberate sex from oppression

the feminists who have long demanded that we **see sex**, as we know it, not as some primordial, pre-political given, but **as an effect of politics, all too easily and falsely naturalised**.

The **task was to liberate sex from the distortions of oppression**, not simply to divide it into the consensual (unproblematic) and non-consensual (problematic). 95

political critique of sex v/ liberal demand

what is male sexual entitlement [...] if not a paradigm of how politics shapes sexual desire?

Can we position ourselves against male sexual entitlement to women's bodies in general, and against the misogynistic fetishisation of the hot blonde slut or sexy East Asian doll or the vulnerable child's body, without opening ourselves to **a political critique of sex?** 95

To liberate sex from the distortions of oppression is not the same as just saying everyone can desire whatever or whomever they want. **The first is a radical demand; the second is a liberal one.** 96

to discipline not desire itself, but the political forces that presume to instruct it

There is a kind of discipline here, in that it requires us to quiet the voices that have spoken to us since birth, the voices that tell us which bodies and ways of being in the world are worthy and which are unworthy.

**What is disciplined here isn't desire itself, but the political forces that presume to instruct it.** 96

['to let him be sexy'—] Is this an act of discipline, or of love? 97

Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980)

Rich's point is that heterosexuality is a political institution that compels even 'straight' women — through its psychic internalisation, yes, but also through its violent enforcement — to regulate their intimacies, affinities and relations in ways that often betray what it is they really want. [...]

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sexual 'preferences'?

To ask yourself such questions is, I wrote, to 'treat our sexual preferences as less than perfectly fixed'. But perhaps it would be better to say that it requires us to question their status as 'preferences' altogether. 97f.

'To acknowledge that for women h sexuality may not be a "preference" at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and "innately" heterosexual.

Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that . . . capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces including both physical violence and false consciousness.

To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a "preference" or "choice" for women — and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows — will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists.'

—Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) 98

(the ideology of) innate preference

Asserting the innateness and sovereignty of preference has its political uses.

Consider how important the idea of being 'born this way' has been to the gay rights movement, or of being 'trapped in the wrong body' to the trans rights movement. [...]

both have been politically vital in a world in which blame is associated with choice but with not natural endowment. Political claims are often dialectical, best understood as responses to the normative terrain as it stands in the moment they are made 98

Cynthia Nixon: 'being gay was a choice' (2012)

'I've been straight and I've been gay,' she said, 'and gay is better.' [Cynthia Nixon] [...]

But does Nixon's choice to be gay — to set aside men and heterosexuality in favour of a lesbianism that she finds more valuable, more liveable — make her un-gay? 98f.

In *Ambiguity and Sexuality*, William Wilkerson writes: 'Even though we think that our feelings were always there before coming out, we forget, in the very process of this remembering, that our memory reconstructs the previous feelings in light of what they become.' (p. 49) 99

Silvia Federici, noting the price of 'isolation and exclusion' paid by gay women, asks on behalf of straight women: 'But can we really afford relations with men?'

Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework' [1975], in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012): 15—22, p. 22. 99



political lesbianism v/ desire-based, 'real' lesbianism

A lesbian philosopher recently wrote to me to say that while she 'acknowledge[s] the phenomenon of ... political lesbianism' she would 'differentiate between it and a desire-based lesbianism'. [...]

But how often is there a lesbian relationship that is not in some important sense political — **that is not at a deep level about honouring what women, outside the script of heterosexual male domination, can have and be together?** (This is not to say that relationships between women can ever fully exist outside that script.) 99

Andrea Long Chu against political lesbianism, against body positivity 99f.

the transformation of desire: a disciplinary or an emancipatory project?

**Is there no difference between 'telling people to change their desires' and asking ourselves what we want, why we want it, and what it is we want to want?**

**Must the transformation of desire be a disciplinary project** (wilfully altering our desires in line with our politics) — **or can it be an emancipatory one** (setting our desires free from politics)? 100

to give a *liberal* response to a *radical* critique

**Does ethics never belong in the bedroom? How about the club, the dating app, the school dance?** [...]

As Sandra Lee Bartky writes in *Femininity and Domination* (1990), to presuppose that politics does not belong in these places is **to give 'essentially a liberal response to a radical critique of sexuality and, as such, it fails entirely to engage this critique'**. [Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990), p. 50] 100f.

'My worry [is] that moralism about the desires of the oppressor can be a shell corporation for moralism about the desires of the oppressed.'

—Andrea Long Chu

But this is to presuppose a false dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed, as if being oppressed along one dimension exonerates us from the possibility we might oppress anyone else. 101

individualistic morality v/ structural problems?

Is my talk of **transforming desire** moralising in a different sense, in that it focuses too much on personal responsibility?

Racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity: **these are structural problems and** — as we have learned to say — **they demand structural solutions.** [...]

a myopic focus on individual action is characteristic of **a bourgeois morality whose ideological function is to distract from the broader systems of injustice in which we participate.** (To use Chu's phrase, **individualistic morality can be a shell corporation for systemic injustice.**)

**But to say that a problem is structural does not absolve us from thinking about how we, as individuals, are implicated in it, or what we should do about it.** 101

Melinda Cooper, *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books 2017).

prefigurative politics v/ individual personal transformation

a **prefigurative politics** — a politics that insists i als act as if they were already in the world to come — not only alienates those who do not conform, but also becomes an end in itself for those who do. At its worst, **prefigurative politics allows its practitioners to substitute individual personal transformation for collective political transfiguration. It becomes, in other words, a liberal politics.**

But the same is true of a politics that refuses prefiguration. What does it mean to say that we want to transform the political world — but that we ourselves will remain unchanged?  
102

the real question

the real question: **how do we engage in a political critique of sex without slipping into the misogynistic logic of sexual entitlement ('the right to sex') or into a moral authoritarianism that disciplines rather than emancipates? [...]**

And how do we do so without turning inwards, without replacing a political project with a personal one?

The answer to the question, I take it, is **a practical one — a matter, as philosophers like to say, not of knowing-*that*, but of knowing-*how*.**

**Know-how is to be found not through theoretical investigation but through experiments of living.** 102

'fuckability', 'unfuckability', 'rapeability' (MacKinnon) — desirability as constructed by our sexual politics

I am talking about **desirability as constructed by our sexual politics**, which enforces a racialised hierarchy that places the white woman above the brown or black woman, the light-skinned brown or black woman above the dark-skinned brown or black woman, and so on. Fuckability (like Catharine MacKinnon's 'rapeability') is precisely a product of the 'differences in how society rewards you for fucking blondes v black women'. **There is no 'fuckability, generally'** [...]

certain women's bodies are rapeable, and certain women's bodies fuckable, because they are assigned that status by the dominant cultural norms. **The fuckable body, like the rapeable body, is in this sense irreducibly a construction.** 103

Black women's bodies are coded as hypersexual, inviting and demanding men's sexual attention, while conferring on the men who have access to them less social status than they gain by having access to the supposedly chaste and innocent bodies of white women. [...]

**The truth is that all women's bodies are supremely fuckable, in one way or another.** 103f.

'to stymie the spectre of undesirability' (Ethnoman) 104

the 'cotton ceiling'

My 'Right to Sex' piece received a barrage of furious tweets from 'gender critical' lesbian feminists who have accused me of endorsing the logic of the 'cotton ceiling'. I find a small irony in this, given that I diagnosed the notion of the 'cotton ceiling' as part of a logic of sexual entitlement that must be rejected. 109

the 'Platinum Star Gay'

the idea of the 'Platinum Star Gay' [...]

Is this the expression of an innate, and thus pmissible revulsion — or a learned and suspect misogyny? 110

This is not to say that we can just change at will the sort of sexed bodies we are attracted to. 111

unjustified transphobia v/ justified wariness of men

The crucial question, in a sense, is whether a sexual aversion to women with penises is best explained by an unjustified transphobia, or a justified wariness of men.

But this is precisely the distinction that trans-exclusionary feminists are unwilling to draw. 111

Incels today claim that there are no women incels, or 'femcels'. 114

A vexed question: **when is being sexually or romantically marginalised a facet of oppression, and when is it just a matter of bad luck, one of life's small tragedies?** (When I was a first-year undergraduate I had a professor who said, to our grave disappointment, that **there would be heartbreak even in the post-capitalist utopia.**)

**Are the un-beautiful an oppressed class? The short? The chronically shy?** [?!] 115

**Femcels** point out that for most of these men, what they really want is not love or sexual intimacy, but the status that comes with attracting hot white women. 116

presumed entitlement

The analogy between angry incels and the 'angry young man' Trump voter is telling. In both cases, the anger is ostensibly about inequality, but in reality it is often about the threatened loss of white male privilege. [...]

There is no protest against inequality or injustice here, merely a protest at the loss of presumed entitlement. 116f.

the grievance politics of flailing white masculinity

from Gamergate, Red Pill and Jordan Peterson to Unite the Right, Proud Boys and Three Percenters 118

the incel's contradiction

This is the deep contradiction at the heart of the incel phenomenon: incels oppose themselves to a sexual market in which they see themselves as losers, while being wedded to the status hierarchy that structures that market. 120

incels as a collision of two pathologies

incels represent **a collision of two pathologies.**

- On one hand, there is the pathology of what is sometimes called **neoliberalism**: an **assimilation of an ever-increasing number of domains of life to the logic of the market.**

- On the other, there is the pathology of **patriarchy**, which has, in capitalist societies, tended to **see women and the home as refuges from the market, as sources of freely given care and love**. In so doing, **patriarchy ignores all the ways that these ‘spontaneous’ acts of devotion have been demanded of women: by gendered training, by the material necessities of marriage, by implicit threat**. [...]

Incels’ real complaint is that there are no women to offer them respite from the very system that their ideology — in its insistence on women as status-conferring commodities — props up. 120

Douthat’s, Hanson’s alleged alternative

Douthat’s conservative, religiously inflected vision is not a genuine alternative to Hanson’s proposal to recognise a state-enforced right to sex. Monogamous marriage, the heteronormative family and norms of chastity are — like Hanson’s government subsidies for incels — parts of a patriarchal infrastructure designed to secure men’s access to women’s bodies and minds.

From the feminist perspective, it **does not matter if it is the state or society that is enforcing men’s sexual entitlement — and in truth it is always both**. 121

the sexual revolution of the 1960s left us wanting

Indeed, what is remarkable about the sexual revolution — this is why it was so formative for the politics of a generation of radical feminists — is **how much was left unchanged**.

Women who say no still really mean yes, and women who say yes are still sluts. Black and brown men are still rapists, and the rape of black and brown women still doesn’t count. Girls are still asking for it. Boys still must learn to give it.

**Whom exactly, then, did the sexual revolution set free?**

**We have never yet been free**. 121f.