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## What does pornography say about me(n)?: How I became an anti-pornography activist

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I hate pornography. I hate what pornography does to women, what it does to men, what it says to men to do to women and other men.

In spite of my current convictions about pornography, I have not always felt this way. For much of my life I supported and actively used pornography. This essay examines my process from pro-pornography consumer to anti-pornography activist. As a bisexual man, I've consumed—and have since become critical of—both heterosexual and gay male pornography. As I'll explain, my experiences indicate how both are similar forms of men's sexist violence. Through the lens of my experience as a pornography consumer, I will look at what pornography says to and about men, and in particular what pornography says to men about what to do to women and other men. Finally, I will offer some observations on organizing men to become more actively involved in efforts against pornography, prostitution and other forms of men's sexist violence.

I am a European-American, thirty-something, queer-identified male from a working-class Texas background. I am an activist in the feminist movement to end men's violence as well as in the bisexual movement, in anti-racist struggles, and in the movement for anti-militarism and nonviolence. As a social worker, I have also provided therapeutic services to women and men who have been victimized by men, as well as intervention services with men who batter, and with adolescent and adult men who sexually offend. Still, however, my primary focus is on community organizing, direct action, and policy analysis. It seems to me that working to end men's abuse and violence, and to transform the context in which men's violence and abuse occurs (i.e. institutionalized misogyny) through social change, is as essential as providing direct services to support the women and men who are harmed.

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For men to be involved in combating sexism, men's violence, and men's exploitation of women and other men through pornography and prostitution, men must see these issues as relevant for and to us—we need to define these issues as *men's* issues, while simultaneously keeping those who are harmed in and by pornography and prostitution at the center of our thinking, analysis and activism. Rather than doing this work to benefit women (which too easily slips into a form of paternalism and protectionism that only maintains male supremacy), men need to partner with women—to do the work that men need to do in ways that are accountable to feminist leadership and that ultimately enhance gender justice.

Before I go further, I should note the danger in using autobiographical narrative to expand or explain theory. As Michael Awkward (2001) explains, on the one hand, autobiographical narrative allows me to describe and account for my experience of using and coming to reject pornography, and more generally my relations to white and male privilege. This process, one that John Stoltenberg describes as 'revolutionary honesty', is essential for men wishing to expose the processes of male privilege, male bonding, and male oppression of women. On the other hand, autobiographical exploration by definition places me (as a European American man) at the center. The danger of this process is at least twofold: first, that the focus of attention is on me, rather than on the pornography and its harm to women and men; and second, that it reproduces the pornographic, male supremacist paradigm by once again placing men at the center. My hope, then, is to use a self-conscious, self-critical autobiographical forum to focus attention on pornography and the harm that it does, while simultaneously de-centering myself and subverting the pornographic, male supremacist paradigm. Ultimately, you, the reader, are the judge of how well I do.

### **Getting here from there**

I was born into a liberal family, with parents who were very open about sexuality. One of their main goals in relation to their children was that we would never feel ashamed about who we were as sexual beings. The shame and embarrassment I learned about sex did not come from home, but from school, peers, and elsewhere. For my parents, almost no questions were out of bounds. We were actively encouraged to talk about sex and sexuality (even at times when we didn't want to). Mom and dad supported gay male and lesbian rights long before it became politically correct to do so, and invited out gay men and lesbians into our home—no one was ever asked or expected to 'closet' themselves in any way around us as kids.

Periodically, during my pre-adolescent and adolescent years (the seventies and early eighties), my parents taught classes on human sexuality in the

community, through local colleges, and in churches. They designed these classes to be open and challenging. For example, they would ask their students to switch gender roles for a whole day (not just in class). My parents also took the class to visit the local strip joint, arranging to meet and interview one or more of the strippers before their performance. After each of these experiences, the class period would be spent processing the students' reactions.

It was in this context that pornography was a part of my life. Pornography was openly a part of our home—not on the coffee table or as a 'center piece', but it was in the family room bookshelves. Like other books in the house, we had access to the pornography, as well as to *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and other books on human sexuality. Pornography was so acceptable and normalized in our family that, when I was 18, my older brother gave me a subscription to *Penthouse* as a Christmas present.

I learned much later that my father brought the pornography into the house and that, in fact, my mother was somewhat uncomfortable with it being there and being so open. But given the efforts they were trying to make together for us to be as comfortable as possible with sexuality and nudity, any misgivings she had about the pornography were countered by her desire to be as open and accepting as possible.

I was raised to understand that people are inherently sexual beings and that our sexuality is something sacred and beautiful. I grew up understanding that pornography was the depiction of nudity and that looking at pornography was one way to appreciate the beauty of sexuality. It never entered my mind to critically examine *how* women, men and sex were depicted in the pornography that we saw, or to explore *which* women were shown and how different women were differently depicted. It never occurred to me to examine the lessons I learned as a result of looking at pornography—the lessons about men and masculinity, women and femininity, relating to (and with) women as a man, being sexual, having sex, etc. What I learned was that looking at naked women and masturbating to those pictures was part of 'normal' male sexual development. What I learned was that looking at women as sexual beings and 'appreciating their beauty' was natural, healthy, expected . . . and a right that I could expect as a man.

After I left home and went to college, my use of pornography continued and escalated, reflecting the acceptability and normalcy of men's use of heterosexual pornography. In the men's dorms that I lived in at a south Texas university (as in most male dorms and other environments), not only was pornography tolerated, it was actively promoted. Pornography was seen as a right, almost a necessity, that was above reproach or question; along with our textbooks, backpack, pens and notebooks, we had our pornography. Most of the men, I suspect, bought or otherwise had regular access to pornography—

mostly through magazines (this was the early to mid 1980s, prior to the advent of the world wide web and the explosion of internet pornography). Pornographic pictures decorated our dorm rooms and the bathrooms; pulling out a pornographic magazine during a party was common, and it was not unheard of for us to show pornographic videos in the lobby on the campus-supplied TV and VCR.

In general, men's use of pornography is a private matter, although publicly known, acknowledged and accepted. So it was for me and the other men in my dorms. We looked at pornography quite openly, yet there was also a sense in which our looking was a private matter. Defining men's use of pornography as 'private' allowed us to use pornography with no real consequences. Our viewing of pornography was constructed and understood as a 'personal (and therefore private) choice' and one that therefore was beyond any debate or deliberation. We used heterosexual pornography as a way to bond with each other—and the assumption of privacy congealed the bond. By agreeing (or at least playfully arguing) about which women were attractive and what we would like to do with those women, we developed a camaraderie and increased our affinity with each other. As a public event, using pornography advertised our views of women, sex, and ourselves. Women were on notice about how they were going to be looked at when they came to the dorm. As a private matter—defined as a 'choice' that men have the right to—our use of pornography was exempt from criticism.

I suspect that I was no different from the other men in that I would look at the pornography in public settings, and discuss it openly, but would masturbate privately. This private envelope around using pornography was where I created my fantasies about the women in the pornographic pictures and the women I knew (or wished I knew) I would replace the women in the pornographic pictures with while masturbating. Again, I suspect that I was no different from the other men in this respect. We all had women that we came across on campus whom we wanted to use like the women in pornography were used. For example, I picked women from campus that I was attracted to and who looked like they would do the things that I wanted to do with (or to) them. Then I'd find pictures of them (in the student newspaper, the school album, etc.) and masturbate to their pictures and those in pornography. I would, in effect, re-create these women in my mind to be the women in pornography—that is, women who liked having done to them exactly what I liked doing to them. I chose women who I thought would be more willing to comply with my sexual demands—and who I fantasized (again, based on their image) would enjoy the particular sexual activities as well. I never fantasized about women whom I liked, or with whom I had any kind of relationship. I always fantasized about women I didn't know or knew only peripherally.

It was while living in this context that I slowly (and reluctantly) began making connections between pornography and the rape and domestic violence to which I bore witness at the shelter. During my first year in college, I had begun volunteering at the local Women's Center (a joint domestic violence/rape crisis program). The year was 1983, and I was seventeen and living in an all-male dorm. The Hays County Women's Center operated from an overtly feminist perspective that identified domestic and sexual violence as weapons of sexism—as well as violence perpetrated by individual men. My work at the Center was where I first began examining men's violence, and this was the first time that I was exposed to feminist literature and theory on violence and oppression. It was also where I first began considering my use of pornography.

I slowly began to accept the feminist analysis of pornography as harmful to women, but I also continued to enjoy looking at pornography, held onto the connection it provided with the other men in the dorm (a connection that was growing increasingly tenuous as a result of my developing feminist consciousness), and felt entitled to the sexual release I got by masturbating to pornography. So I continued looking at pornography even for the first few years that I worked in the movement, and at the Center.

As I became increasingly critical of pornography, this bond I had with other men became increasingly threatened. Looking at pornography with them was one of the few ways that I maintained a connection with them. I wasn't sure what kind of man I was becoming (there were painfully few role models) and I didn't know how to be a man, much less bond with other men, outside of the only kind of connection that I had with men—which had as much to do with looking at and sexualizing women as with anything else. I wanted to maintain this bond. So even if my bonding with other men came at the expense of justice—at the expense of women—initially it was a cost I was willing to pay. Even though I claimed that I knew better, I continued to look at pornography even after I began to understand it as a form of men's sexist violence.

As I continued to grow into a pro-feminist consciousness, my commitment to maintain this bonding with other men became increasingly tenuous, and finally broke. For the more than two years that I continued to live in the dorm after adopting an anti-pornography, pro-feminist stance, my connection with the other men in the dorm was virtually non-existent. I simply lived there. My friends, supporters, and comrades became exclusively women. There was no specific act or moment that moved me to finally stop looking at pornography and throw it away. Rather, it was the culmination of what I was learning about feminism, pornography, and men's violence; what I was learning about myself; and my growing commitment to bring my personal behaviors in line with my developing political beliefs. Becoming pro-feminist—in lifestyle as well as politically—is a process. As with most processes, my own growth was in fits

and starts. Coming to understand pornography from a feminist perspective and then moving to actually stop using pornography was a matter of taking ‘two steps forward and one back’.

As I began to openly question our use of pornography (at least using publicly funded equipment), one other man also raised his voice. Marshall’s objections were based on his religious beliefs and seemed to have nothing to do with gender justice. While neither of our objections was ultimately heeded, his position was at least acknowledged, tolerated and to some degree respected; my position, on the other hand, was mostly ignored and ridiculed. When the men were discussing a pornographic movie or image that they had seen and Marshall came into the room, they would politely change the subject or at least lower their voices. When I came into the room, they would often continue the conversation, watching for my reaction. I had pornography images taped to my dorm door and stuffed into my mailbox, and was frequently taunted into arguments or debates with a group of men (never one-on-one) about my views. Given that my views were still developing and therefore not fully thought-out or articulate, I was an easy target for this kind of harassment.

What remains one of my most painful memories is of a Christmas ‘gift’ I received during my last year of living in the dorm. One of the traditions in the dorm was to draw names and exchange gag gifts. The night of the dorm party, I had been out with feminist friends, and came in late. Over a dozen of my dorm mates were hanging out; they quickly gathered around to watch as I opened my gift. To my shock and horror, my ‘gift’ was a naked girl baby doll covered in ketchup. I was so dismayed that I initially didn’t know how to react. I went numb, let the ‘gift’ drop to the floor, and quietly walked to my room. From that point forward, I remained utterly disengaged from the men in the dorm and from any of the dorm activities. Although that last assault was not specifically targeting my views about pornography, it was clearly an attack on my views of violence against women and children. It exposed the level of utter contempt the other men had for me and my work.

It was through working at the battered women’s shelter that I most clearly began recognizing the connections between pornography and other forms of men’s violence against women. Most of the women who came to the center (or whom I accompanied to the hospital or police station)—the majority of whom were Latina—were reluctant to disclose the details of their abuse and victimization to a 17–20-year-old white man. Even still, some of the women did share with me the remarkable gift of their stories—often much more than I ever wanted to know. Some of their stories included the ways that the men who battered them used pornography. Initially, I maintained the facade that there was a fundamental difference between those men, who put the women they loved in the shelter or the hospital, and me. As I become more involved

in the movement, and came to better understand the dynamics of power and control, I increasingly came to realize just how similar I was (and am) to the men who choose to abuse the women they claim to love. My commitment to continue looking at pornography was, perhaps, one of the most striking ways I was like 'them'. As I listened to the women who stayed in the shelter or who came to the center, and heard them describe the ways that their men treated them, I began to hear some common themes—themes of expectations, rights, and entitlements. As I began recognizing these themes, I also began seeing them in the ways that I acted with the women I dated, and in the ways that we as men talked about the women we dated and were attracted to.

The often brutal stories these women shared, coupled with the analysis I was beginning to understand, led me to look more critically at how my use of pornography poisoned my view of women, undermined my commitment to social justice, disturbed my view of sex and sexuality, damaged my view of men, and ultimately undermined my humanity. Thanks largely to my early feminist mentors (including Delma Gomez, Cindy Medina, Linda Webster, Dr. Ramona Ford, Debby Tucker, Loretta Ross, and others), I began to criticize what I had always taken as normal, healthy and a right. I began to recognize the stories that some of the women from the center told me in the stories I read in the pages of those magazines, and in the fantasies that I myself created.

The women whom I fantasized about having sex with (on, at, in . . .) became strikingly similar to the women with whom I sat at the hospital, in the shelter or at the police station. The women that I fantasized about began to lose their anonymity and they started to become more real. This is not to say that I got to know any of the women whose images I jacked off to, but rather that their images began to hold real human meaning for me. Rather than being anonymous names and pictures of 'women who looked like they would like to . . .', they became women who were sisters, friends, girlfriends and daughters of someone, and who might have been abused as kids, raped by a date, abused by a boyfriend, or who watched their father beat up their mother. As I began to see through the pornographic imagery of these women—my school-mates—my ability to masturbate to their images became increasingly difficult. The sexualized image I had created of them began to fade into the real women that they were. My experience mirrors that of the men in my parents' classes, when they interviewed the women strippers before watching the show. They reported that they couldn't enjoy the show as much any more because the women had become real to them through the interview.

I gradually, and painfully, began to realize that my sexual fantasies (encouraged by pornography) were more about violation than about sexual discovery and relating. The 'sex' promoted by pornography is not based on mutual exploration and satisfaction, and does not hold respect, dignity, and

justice as core values. Rather, pornography is about men doing what we will to women, and women depicted as deserving and liking what we do to them—enjoying the position of being done to (or on, or in, or at). So long as it is called ‘sexual’ and understood as purely personal (and therefore private) behavior, and as long as sex is defined as the sexual satisfaction of me(n), then what is actually done is defined as beyond debate. Ultimately, my participation in pornography was my participation in violation and abuse.

It was somewhere in this process that I began reading Andrea Dworkin. Her work was a profound influence on my developing pro-feminist/anti-pornography position. Although I can’t remember who or what originally led me to her work, I do remember vividly the first book of hers that I read (*Our Blood*) and its immense impact on me.<sup>1</sup> One of the segments that spoke to me follows:

I want to suggest to you that a commitment to sexual equality with males, that is, to uniform character as of motion or surface, is a commitment to becoming the rich instead of the poor, the rapist instead of the raped, the murderer instead of the murdered. I want to ask you to make a different commitment—a commitment to the abolition of poverty, rape and murder; that is, a commitment to ending the system of oppression called patriarchy; to ending the male sexual model itself. (p. 12)

Reading this, as a nineteen-year-old, was challenging and difficult, but Andrea’s prophetic call to justice resonated in me and called me to a deeper commitment—a commitment that included re-examining my use of pornography.

I did not want to hear or believe what she had said in that book—or in some of her later books. I cried at the stories she shared and the enormity of the pain that they uncovered. I became enraged—not only at the horrible injustice that was committed, but also at Andrea for the conclusions that she drew. I was, after all, still committed to my own use of pornography and did not want to have to connect my buying of *Penthouse*, or watching of *Debbie Does Dallas* with the pain and horror that she described. I was not like them . . . I was a kinder, gentler pornography consumer—a pro-feminist reader of *Penthouse* and *Playboy*.

Reading Andrea Dworkin ripped off the blinders of denial and minimizing that I had constructed around my use of pornography—and ripping was exactly what it felt like, as if a portion of my eyelids were being slowly torn away. I had, by then, done enough work myself to allow the ripping to happen,

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1 Although *Our Blood* does not itself directly examine pornography, the analysis Dworkin offered in this book began to influence my developing pro-feminist analysis and the way that I looked at pornography. *Our Blood* was also my introduction to Andrea Dworkin, and my entree into the rest of her works.



but I truly believe that had I not read Andrea's work, I would not have come to understand the depth of degradation, humiliation and pain that I was a party to through my participation in pornography. I learned to hate pornography thanks to Andrea Dworkin.

I did have the choice to close my eyes again once they had been opened—to continue to deny, minimize or ignore the pain and harm that I had become witness to, but that level of self-deception became exceedingly difficult, and the self-denial involved was a huge price to pay. As I began to understand the harm of pornography, and thus, the harm of *my* use of pornography, I struggled with the tension between denying what I was learning—thus allowing myself to continue to look at pornography—and striving to be true to myself. I came to realize the direct connections. I looked at *Penthouse*; the women who were shown in *Penthouse* were harmed by the pictures that I paid for, and the women that I looked at on campus and in the streets of that small south Texas college town were harmed by the change in how I looked at them.

Perhaps most basically, I came to understand, via Dworkin, how pornography represented the most grotesque forms of male self-centeredness. The sex that I learned—and I agree with Dworkin that all men learn, whether heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual—is a sex with *me* at the center. The discourse of pornography is that sex is about *my* (read 'male as the subject') sexual pleasure and release. If my sexual 'partner(s)' achieve sexual pleasure, it is secondary to mine, and occurs as a result of the degree to which they have successfully sexualized their subordination.

### Lessons from [heterosexual] pornography

While looking at pornography, I developed a way of looking at women. I developed, if you will, a pornographic ethic. After looking at pornography, I did not look at women as colleagues, potential friends, or allies, or with any kind of gaze based on justice or caring. I looked at women based on how I compared them to the man-made images of women I saw in the magazines or on the videos. The women I saw on the street, in classes, at meetings, etc. became simply 'fuck-able' to varying degrees. I looked at them and thought about the things that I would like to do *to* (not *with*) them sexually—things that I fantasized they would enjoy, but the ultimate focus of which was my own sexual fulfillment.

Heterosexual pornography offers messages to men not only about *how* to relate to women, but also about *which* women to relate to, and how to relate to different women differently. Not all women are displayed in pornography, and different kinds of women are displayed differently. Lesbians, for example, are depicted as male-focused and still 'really' only wanting penetrative sex. Women of color are depicted more often with multiple men having sex with

(on or in) them, and very often are depicted with animals, being tied up, or with weapons. This pattern reinforces racist gender stereotypes in male consumers—that Latina women are ‘hot’ and insatiable, that African-American women are aggressive and insatiable, that Asian women are submissive and insatiable, and that European-American women are still the ‘real’ prize of sexual conquest. Heterosexual pornography’s messages about different kinds of women reinforce the messages that are already imbedded in our society, and have real ramifications for the real women who are living in communities along with men who look at pornography.

I certainly found this to be true in my experience on the college campus. When I dated women of color or had women of color as friends who came up to my room, the imagery that my dorm mates created about the kinds of sex that I shared with these women was straight out of the pornography that we looked at. For example, when a European-American dorm mate was dating a Latina woman, other men in the dorm would comment on how ‘hot’ she must be, and in other ways expanded upon very sexualized and racialized themes. Granted, this was the way that we conversed about all women—all were rated on the degree to which we saw them as ‘fuckable’—but for women of color and Latinas in particular, these conversations were intensified.

Perhaps even more telling is my experience (much later) of working with adolescent and adult men who sexually offend. In my experience, and according to most of the literature, most men who sexually offend use pornography on a regular basis. Their pornography use not only defined for them an image of women or children, and created sexualized images which they projected onto other women or children; pornography also helped them construct an image of themselves as men—as virile, powerful, sexually attractive and desired by women or children. Men who sexually offend generally differentiate themselves from ‘rapists’ or ‘sex offenders’, indicating that what they did is not the same thing, because (they think) the women or children they assaulted liked what happened. This belief is based in part on their denial and minimizations, but it is also based in part on their pornography use. As much as any single experience, my work with men who sexually offended confirmed for me the ways that pornography creates and enforces messages about men’s sexualized use of violence with women. I can’t describe the number of times I heard men describe, utterly sincerely, how the women or children they raped ‘really liked it’—in spite of their having been arrested and convicted, in spite of the victim’s tears, her pushing him away, her attempts to get away from him. This belief is identical to the fantasies in so much hard-core pornography—pornography that depicts women being forced to do sexual things and ‘liking it’. The message from pornography is that women want sex, often and indiscriminately, and they only need to be reminded (by men, often forcibly) that

they do, after all, want sex.

Pornography taught me these lessons: ‘be in control’, ‘be a top’,<sup>2</sup> ‘your sexual pleasure is tied to the degree to which you can maintain yourself as a top’. Women are depicted as a compilation of holes in which, and body parts on which, to unload men’s cum. Pornography also teaches that men become (and remain) men by penetrating women or other men—in both heterosexual and gay male pornography; that the ‘best sex’ is depicted as involving multiple penetrations. Either a woman or man is penetrated several times at once by different men, is penetrated by a penis and a finger (or dildo, or fist, or some other object) at the same time or is penetrated several times (and in multiple positions) over the period of a sexual encounter. Images of non-penetrative, exploratory, experimental sex are so rare as to be almost nonexistent in pornography. As Dworkin (1987) has convincingly argued, penetration under patriarchy—and especially in pornography—means more than penetration. A man’s act of putting his penis into another’s body connotes that he now owns that person, and once owned, the ‘woman’ relinquishes any right to say no. The more times and ways one is penetrated, the more owned one becomes.

As I reflect upon the lessons I learned through pornography, this lesson stands out. Having sex meant penetration—and once I had penetrative sex with a woman I felt that I then had greater access to her in more situations, at more times, and in more ways. In short, I came to see her as ‘mine.’

### **‘Flirting’ without the pornographers’ gaze**

As I began to better understand pornography, I realized that the masculinity depicted in pornography was not the kind of masculinity—indeed, the kind of personhood—I wanted for myself. I began to develop a view of my own personhood that was fluid, flexible, and allowed for multiple kinds of relationships with both women and other men. I wanted the ability and encouragement to experience sexuality in ways that include softness and pleasure not necessarily derived from genital stimulation. Pornography does not allow these images of masculinity and in fact, it teaches men that being manly requires the dissolution of such ‘wimpy’ characteristics.

I realized that I had to develop a new way to flirt with and date women (I was not at this point out, even to myself, about my bisexuality). Giving up the pornographer’s gaze towards women was hard enough; developing a new gaze that allowed me room to be attracted to women and to express that attraction in non-degrading ways was something else again. I had little

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2 In the US (at least) gay culture refers to sexual partners as ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ to reflect their preferred position in sexual encounters. There is often also an underlying suggestion as to one’s preference in terms of being more submissive (a bottom) or more dominant (a top) in a relationship in general.

support, except for my female feminist friends (with whom, of course, there was little room to talk about how I could flirt or be attracted in a way that subverted the pornographic paradigm). Without any support or models, I found no way to resolve the dilemma, other than to give up dating altogether. While far from a perfect solution, this did provide me with the room and distance I needed to begin re-constructing my gaze towards women in a way that highlighted their humanity while also allowing for any attraction I felt. For several years, then, I did not flirt—at least not consciously. This does not mean that I wasn't attracted, only that I didn't know how to act on those attractions in a way that honored the women to whom I was attracted. Thus, I stopped acting on them at all.

Slowly, I did begin to develop a way to find women attractive outside of the pornographic mindset. I learned to notice the beauty of women and men in a way that was not sexualized and objectified. Beauty was just beauty. I came to realize that the pornographic gaze was a sexualized gaze—seeing beauty only in sexualized terms that in turn were linked to my access. Pornography had taught me not only to notice and appreciate women's beauty, but to sexualize it—and by sexualizing it, I made 'it' something that I had the right, or at least should have the opportunity, to claim. Once sexualized, a woman's beauty became some-*thing* (a thing distinct and separate from her *self*) that I was then entitled to—to look at, make comments about, touch, have sexual release to (either directly or through my fantasies), etc.

As I became better able to notice and acknowledge the beauty of the people around me without sexualizing it, it lost this key element of entitlement and access. You will also note that I included men in this discussion. As women's beauty became less sexualized for me, I was able to notice and acknowledge men's beauty. Thus, this was the time when I began exploring my bisexuality.

For me, it was only through not participating in flirting while I continued to divest myself from the pornographic gaze, that I was finally able to develop a way to look at women and men, to flirt, and to appreciate beauty that felt respectful. I found that I was able to see and appreciate a wider range of 'beauty'—not just the physical attributes that are so highlighted in pornography, but the real beauty of human beings—his eyes, her smile, the way he carries himself, how her joy floods out of her body. These forms of beauty are not even acknowledged under the pornographic gaze, and as long as I continued to look with this gaze, I could not notice them.

### **Coming out and coming to confront gay male pornography**

I began to explore my bisexuality, in part, by looking at and masturbating to gay male pornography. This occurred after I had already come to reject heterosexual pornography. Initially, I believed the pro-pornography hype that

describes gay male pornography as inherently different from heterosexual pornography. According to this view, gay men are subject to what Adrienne Rich (1980) describes as ‘compulsory heterosexuality’—the notion that we are pressured and coerced to act (only) heterosexually. Within such a culture, any depiction of same-sex sexual behavior is a direct affront to compulsory heterosexuality and is therefore understood as an act of rebellion and liberation.

For me, gay male pornography was one way to begin exploring my sexual feelings towards other men and to educate myself about different forms of same-sex sex. I used gay male pornography and had it used on me in order to explore different kinds of sexual expression, and to begin defining my boundaries for sex with other men. By definition, this boundary-setting process means that there were times when I learned what I was comfortable with or enjoyed by engaging in behavior that I later realized I did not like. I understand that this is often part of the process that we go through to learn our limits—sometimes you have to cross a line to figure out where that line is. However, gay male pornography made this limit setting, as a baby queen, much more difficult, and my limits much easier to manipulate by some of the men I dated who were more interested in their sexual pleasure than in my defining limits.

Some of the men I dated would show me gay male pornography as a way of demonstrating what they wanted to do, or thought that I would enjoy. Luckily, I had very few experiences of men being overtly mean or abusive—forcing me to do what I clearly wasn’t interested in doing. But the use of gay male pornography was a way to show me that it was ‘okay’ and that I ‘might’ like it. Having gay male pornography used with me in this way left me feeling vulnerable and rather limited in my options. There was a pressure to comply, to go along with whatever was suggested, because I liked the men I was with, I wanted them to ask me out again, and I didn’t know if I would like what they were describing or not unless I tried it. Being new to the gay/bi male scene, I was unsure about possible ramifications if I chose not to go along (Would he not ask me out again? Would he spread the word to other men? Would I have a hard time finding other men to date? etc.). I was already somewhat suspect because I also dated women, so I feared that any hesitation in going along with the gay male pornographic ethos would be further evidence of my ‘not belonging’.

The use of gay male pornography, combined with my own feelings of inadequacy and doubt, meant that the option to say ‘no’—or to say ‘yes but’—was not clear to me. This is not to say that I was somehow victimized, but rather that the way that gay male pornography was used with me made it more difficult to see the full array of sexual options in front of me, which means that my ability to fully consent was limited.

In retrospect, I also realize how gay male pornography set the tone for these

sexual encounters. In gay pornography, there is a top and a bottom. The possibility of partner (i.e. side-by-side, mutual) gay male sexuality is not depicted. What is normalized and eroticized is the ‘top’ dominating and the ‘bottom’ enjoying being dominated, or at least being the one that is done to (on, in, at). Most of the men I dated, at least initially, were interested in my being the bottom. It was only after being in the gay scene for a while that I began to meet men who were more interested in a partner kind of sexual relationship.

It’s clear, then, that the pornographic ethic I described earlier is not exclusive to heterosexual pornography or to heterosexual men. Gay and bi men learn the very same ethic, only with other men as the target of our gaze. As I began accepting my attraction to men, gay male pornography taught me which men were—and how to present myself as—fuckable. The men that are done-to in gay male pornography are presented as different from the men who are doing. This difference is often gendered and raced—the men who are done-to are ‘feminized’ in many ways, including through the use of language. The one done to becomes the ‘woman’, ‘bitch’, ‘cunt’, ‘whore’, ‘pussy’ (Kendall, 2002). By looking at gay male pornography, I learned which of these two options I wanted to be—the top (‘man’) or the bottom (‘woman’). In the gay male pornography that I saw (unlike most of the gay sexual activity that I engaged in), these roles were rigidly maintained—the top was not penetrated and the bottom did no penetrating. In this way, gay male pornography maintains the very same social oppression—of women and queer men—that it allegedly rebels against.<sup>3</sup>

Through gay male pornography I learned not only how to ‘gaze’ at other men, but also how to be gazed at—and to like it. The gaze itself was no different than the gaze I had grown up learning how to direct at women. Turning that gaze to other men took some additional learning and self-exploration, but the gaze, and its objectifying of its target, was the same. If our goal is to create and sustain justice in our relationships, to treat others and be treated with the respect and dignity that every body deserves, then we need to look at other men and women, appreciate their beauty, and be turned on by them without the pornographic gaze.

Currently, as an out bisexual involved in queer activism, I have found very limited opportunities to offer a perspective critical of gay male pornography. The scorn and contempt I face suggests that by ‘daring’ to criticize gay male pornography, I am challenging sacred territory. As I mentioned above, I am

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3 For a more detailed development of this argument, see Kendall and Funk, ‘Gay Male Pornography’s “Actors”’: When Fantasy Isn’t’. In *The Journal of Trauma and Recovery* (forthcoming).

already suspect within many queer communities for being bisexual, and my exploration of the harm perpetrated by gay male pornography fuels these suspicions. I've been called a man-hater (a charge that has some different meaning and power when made by gay men) and have found myself excluded from queer rights organizing (for example, from projects combating violence against queer people).

Gay and bisexual men's use of pornography, it seems, is sacrosanct. Any suggestion that some (most, all, any) of the men involved in gay male pornography may be harmed, or that gay and bisexual men's use of pornography runs counter to sexual justice and ultimately undermines the queer rights struggle, is utterly unwelcome. As the message is unwelcome, so too is the messenger.

My experiences in gay male communities and movements are, in the end, not dissimilar to my experiences of developing an anti-pornography analysis while living in the all-male dorm in Texas. It seems that men, regardless of their sexual orientation, hold very tightly to their dearly felt 'right' to look at and use other people's nudity. The sexual liberal cult within gay and bisexual male communities functions to negate any critical thinking about 'dirty pictures'.

Despite this environment, I have found that I still need to raise my voice. As a result, I have developed some very strong positive relationships with queer women. Every time I speak up, it builds upon the times that I have spoken out before, and there is a little more awareness, sensitivity and room for questioning. Sometimes allies are discovered in the most unlikely places. As with any other effort for social change, each episode of 'speaking out' is a drop against the boulder of previously held beliefs.

### **Men of color in pornography**

Men of color are rarely depicted in either gay or straight pornography (although this may be changing with the continuing development of the on-line pornography industry and the development of several sites that focus specifically on inter-racial sex). When they are depicted, the image is that they are 'well endowed' and sexually driven. These depictions maintain and reinforce the racist stereotypes of men of color. Heterosexual pornography conveys to European-American men that men of color (particularly African-American men) are threatening competitors for the 'finest prize' of European-American women's sexuality. It reinforces a white and male supremacist view of men of color as a threat to 'white womanhood', in addition to portraying 'white women' as objects to be desired, protected, taken, had, used, etc. As a liberal 'white boy' in South Texas, I considered myself to be anti-racist and had men of color as friends, dorm mates, and roommates; still, I found myself

looking at men of color (including my male friends) and wondering if they really were as I had seen them depicted in pornography.

Similar images of men of color are found in gay male pornography, although with the complicating factor that men of color are also depicted, in interracial sex, as the 'bottom'. When men of color are depicted as the bottom, it is often with multiple 'partners' or with the same kinds of weapons and penetrative objects that women of color are depicted with in heterosexual pornography. Men of color are shown as insatiably sexualized (even more so than European-American men) and as willing to do anything for a good lay. This imagery, maintained, reinforced and strengthened by pornography (both heterosexual and gay male), could have been produced during slavery and reconstruction, during the Texas independence wars (in relation to Latino men), during the Indian wars, or during the building of the rail line (in relation to Asian men). It is a dangerous white supremacist fantasy, and it is alive and well in pornography.

As these differing portrayals imply, men from different backgrounds have different relationships with pornography and prostitution, as well as different experiences with male privilege and sexist violence. The ways that men from various groups are portrayed in pornography, the use of men in prostitution, the ability of men to control women and other men in pornography and prostitution (i.e., as producers, promoters, director, owners, etc) all have an impact on how men from different backgrounds relate to pornography. This is not to say that all men don't benefit and don't abuse women, or that men's use of women or other men in pornography and prostitution is not always harmful; this is to say that men's use is more complicated than blanket statements suggest, and it is deserving of a more complex analysis and a broader range of activism.

### **Implications for organizing men**

The main goal of this essay is to suggest means of mobilizing men to take action against pornography, sexism, and men's violence. This means, in organizing men, that we work with men from where they are (not from where we want them to be). By better understanding men's different relationship with various forms of men's violence and sexism, as described above, we are better equipped to support men as they begin working for gender and sexual justice.

There are three key questions that flow from this analysis and that affect efforts to mobilize and organize men. First, how do pornography and prostitution keep men from being involved actively in ending men's sexist violence against women? Second, how do pornography and prostitution interfere with men's ability to create and sustain loving, passionate and just relationships with women and other men? Third, what does it say about men that these



forms of sexual exploitation exist in the first place?

Unpacking this last question results in a host of additional questions. What does it say about men that these forms of sexual exploitation have become huge multi-billion dollar industries? What does it say about men that these specific forms of sexual exploitation of women have resulted in the development of a huge underground international network that traffics women for the purposes of men's sexual satisfaction—a trafficking network that is, reportedly, third in size after drug and weapons trafficking? What does it say about men that these forms of sexual exploitation are not seen as exploitation—the harm denied, the pain ignored—but are so firmly entrenched as forms of sexual expression, and thus as a right? What is the connection between men's participation in pornography and prostitution, and men's involvement in rape and sexual harassment? What is the relationship between men's participation in pornography and prostitution and men's racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and ageism?

Most organizing and activism is based primarily on identity politics—getting people mobilized and increasing their skills to more effectively take action to address those issues that directly affect them. This approach has also been used, at least initially, in many of the efforts to organize 'allies' (such as white folks against racism, heterosexuals against homophobia, and men against sexism). Organizing men against pornography, prostitution, and other forms of sexist violence often begins by organizing men as allies, and examining and exposing the ways that pornography and prostitution affect men. Thus, one part of organizing men against pornography and prostitution requires showing how men—individually and collectively—are harmed by the production, distribution and consumption of pornography. In such efforts, we must always take into account the different relationships that different populations of men have with pornography and prostitution. We must also be extremely careful not to pit men's harm and pain related to pornography against that of women. To more effectively mobilize and organize men, part of our work is to develop deeper analyses of how men are harmed by pornography within an overall context that focuses on women's experiences and needs.

These kinds of tactics can be useful as a way to begin engaging men in a discussion about pornography and prostitution (as well as about other forms of men's sexist violence). Some such attempts have emphasized that using pornography (and/or prostituted women or men) inhibits men's healthy sexual development and growth, undermines men's abilities to maintain healthy and just sexual relationships with women and/or other men, and increases their likelihood of committing sexual assault. However, these harms are often difficult to identify and articulate. Many men have a hard time recognizing this harm on other than an intellectual level; there is little emotional connection

and 'buy in'. Furthermore, any harm that men identify must be weighed against the immediate, concrete, and dramatic benefits that they receive from pornography and prostitution (directly from their own use, as well as indirectly from the existence of these industries). Organizing men from this perspective is based on men's self-interest and thus requires that organizers identify a greater self-interest for men in stopping their pornography use than in continuing it. For these reasons, men's self interest is a tenuous foundation for mobilizing and organizing men against prostitution and pornography. While it may be useful in opening the door for men, it does not seem effective in creating an ongoing movement of men committed to eliminating pornography, supporting women and men who have been victimized, and creating sexual and gender justice.

Thus, as anti-pornography activists, we need to create tools and analyses that move beyond identity-based organizing. While some have argued that men aren't capable of being involved for reasons beyond their self-interest, our experiences as activists, and my personal experiences depicted here, suggest otherwise. As I have described in this chapter, my own movement to an anti-pornography position was based on my growing understanding of the harm caused by pornography, my empathy with the women and men who are harmed, and my increasing awareness of the ways that pornography undermined my personal commitment to justice, freedom and liberation. Although my sex life improved dramatically as I began critiquing and dissecting the pornographic ethos I had grown up with, this element of self-interest served to reinforce my growing commitment to justice as the primary motivator.

On a broader level, many men are leaders and involved participants in anti-globalization, anti-racism, and anti-militarism movements, as well as in other social justice and human rights causes that do not benefit them personally. They (like the women in such movements) are motivated primarily not by self-interest or identity politics, but by a broader moral commitment. It is this same sense of moral commitment that needs to be developed for men in confronting pornography.

I broke with pornography when I recognized the inherent immorality and hypocrisy of my working for gender justice on the one hand, while using my other hand to jack off to the imagery of women created by other men for me(n) to sexualize. Being committed to justice and using pornography is inherently contradictory, because one cannot look at others as fully equal, empowered, dynamic human beings if one is also looking at them through the pornographic gaze.

Developing creative and effective tactics for mobilizing men means, in part, re-claiming the morality of gender justice and human rights. The conservative right has been extremely successful in organizing from a 'morality' perspective,

and in the process, they have hijacked the language of morality. But ending pornography through anti-woman, anti-choice, anti-sexuality, anti-gay perspectives is neither just nor moral. Organizing men against pornography requires that we continue to develop a pro-feminist radical morality—one that is sex positive, that supports equality of rights for people of all sexual orientations, and that supports a full array of reproductive rights for women and reproductive responsibilities for men. It is morally correct for women to be seen and celebrated for their full humanity, and to be supported and encouraged to express that humanity.

Organizing men against pornography from a morality angle can be seen in the ‘pose exercise’ developed by John Stoltenberg and Men Against Pornography. In this exercise, men are invited, in front of other men, to ‘strike a pose’ in the way that women are depicted in pornography (the men are allowed to keep their clothes on and the ‘props’ are not a part of the exercise). The men posing are then asked to describe how they feel in general, and in particular how empowered and comfortable they feel while taking the pose. Invariably the men describe feeling disempowered, uncomfortable, vulnerable, anxious, and so on. The exercise thus builds their empathy with the women in pornography, and appeals to their sense that it is morally right for each person to feel empowered and morally wrong for anyone to be systematically disempowered.

Additionally, by exploring how the men in heterosexual pornography (either as ‘co-stars’ or as producers) view the women in pornography; and how they themselves view the women in pornography, men can begin to see how pornography strips women of their multi-dimensional humanity, creating a sexualized uni-dimensional caricature that is depicted as always open, available and desirous of men. This view of women is morally wrong, and an industry that systematically portrays women in this way is morally bankrupt.

Pornography is hate propaganda, and prostitution is exploitation. If we want a world that is based on justice—gender justice, racial justice, class justice, justice among people of various sexual orientations—then pornography and prostitution must be eliminated. To eliminate pornography and prostitution requires that men be involved—not only because men are half the population, but more importantly because men are the main producers, distributors, and consumers of women and men in pornography and prostitution. The morality of justice is our morality, and it cannot coexist with pornography and prostitution.

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