



Pornography

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Note: *all* my lectures involve us thinking together about sensitive and difficult issues related to sex, violence, and (often disruptive) desires. Please exercise caution when reading or listening to my research. I don't include graphic descriptions but do discuss genitals and sexual pleasure. I also engage with arguments around sexually explicit literature and images, obscenity, and misogyny. Knowing our history, I believe, helps unmake harmful and traumatic practices.

1972.

Linda Lovelace (pornographic actress): pornographers 'treated me as if I was a piece of meat'.

1977.

Robin Morgan (feminist): 'Pornography is the theory; rape, the practice'.

2021.

Billie Eilish (singer/songwriter): 'I think [pornography] really destroyed my brain'.

Pornography is divisive. It is guaranteed to incite heated debates between people inhabiting different subject positions based on shifting intersections of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, age, generation, (dis)ability, and so on. Is pornography objectifying or liberating? Will pornographic experimentation drive couples apart or reignite passionless relationships? Does it bolster misogynistic values and practices or destabilize hegemonic masculinity, creating space for critiques of the oppression of women? Can it provide creative ways of re-imagining the self in relation to others? Does it have a potential to generate safe and sustaining communities for LGBTQI people and other minorities?

These are all urgent questions. Today's talk explores such issues from an historical perspective. My fundamental premise is that pornography is a cultural category that varies over historical time and place. This requires us to reject any universal characterisation of the genre. It is wrong to speak about 'pornography' as a homogenous entity, easily recognisable despite variations across time and space. Recent feminist debates about pornography continue to revolve around the polarised positions established during the 'porn wars' of the 1970s and 1980s, in which anti-pornography feminists were pitted against pro-pornography (now, commonly referred to as sex-positive) ones. This assumes that a *historically specific* form of pornography that arose in the 1970s is the standard by which *all* pornography across the ages should be judged. It assumes that pornography as it was produced and consumed in largely white, middle-class America in the 1970s and 1980s, with its profoundly misogynistic outlook, is the universal model of the genre. On the contrary, this talk draws attention to periods of history and minority genres of smut that are receptive to a more subversive, and therefore emancipatory, imaginaries.

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Before addressing the chief argument of this talk, I will briefly address three questions. What is 'pornography'? How does class and race figure in dominant forms of pornography as they emerged in

nineteenth and twentieth century Britain and America? (Unfortunately, in a talk of this length I cannot engage with non-western traditions of the genre.) Do pornographic depictions bear any relation to 'real' sexual practices? The final half of the talk explores two periods of history in which *explicitly political* forms of pornography dominated the field. Of course, all cultural constructions are inherently political. But what distinguishes these two genres of pornography is their unequivocal focus on systemic injustices sustained by Crown, Church, and State.

What are people doing when they label something 'pornographic'? Definitions tend to coalesce around the view that pornography is the explicit description or depiction of sexual organs or practices with the intention of arousing sexual feelings. There are numerous reasons to be wary of such a definition. Was François Boucher intending to arouse his audiences when he painted *Leda and the Swan* (c.1740)? [Show image of painting.] The painting depicts the 'seduction' of a young woman by a swan. The woman's vulva and breasts are clearly on display; the swan's long phallic neck is poised to penetrate her. Would the painting be 'art' when viewed in a gallery and 'pornography' when tacked to a wall in a brothel? Clearly, context matters.

Another difficulty facing attempts to define 'pornography' arises from its extreme diversity. Commentators typically focus on commercially produced artifacts. Amateur creations, such as sexually explicit love letters exchanged in private between lovers, have tended to be bracketed separately, even though 'everyday erotica' is clearly designed to be sexually arousing. As with its more commercial equivalents, homemade pornography illuminates political as well as sexual tensions. This is one of the themes of Lisa Sigel's book, *The People's Porn: A History of Handmade Porn in America* (2020), which traces the way early Americans transformed commonplace objects into sexually charged ones. For example, in the U.S. during the first half of the nineteenth century, the eagles engraved on coins were changed into flying phalluses and 'one cent' coins were scratched so that the 'e' in 'cent' became a 'u'. The creative labour that went into such transformations reveals the pleasures of public vulgarity.

Transformations of coinage into pornographic objects that can be exchanged between people 'in the know' bears little resemblance to more commercial forms of pornography – a further indication of the excesses as well as instability of the genre. Prominent nineteenth century forms of pornography included such diverse items as books, woodcut prints, lithographs, engravings, stereoscopes, mutoscopes, transparencies, and postcards, although, prior to the 1880s, *written* forms of pornography were more prominent than visual ones. These early forms of pornography were highly class specific: they were addressed to white, wealthy men. They often required readers to understand Latin, Greek, or French; they assumed a sophisticated knowledge of ancient literatures if readers were to grasp the allusions being made. This erotica was expensive. The 1882 pornographic magazine *The Cremorne* cost one shilling – that is, more than a week's wages for a respectable worker – while *My Secret Life* (which, over seven volumes, documented the sexual escapades of 'Walter', a Victorian gentleman) cost an exorbitant one hundred pounds, or two years wages. Even middle-class readers probably couldn't afford such luxuries, let alone working-class men, one third of whom were illiterate anyway. The spread of pornography to *all* classes only occurred with the introduction of cheap postcards, selling for three pence each, and regularly sporting raunchy images of women in semi-undress.

The class-based nature of early pornography meant that it could masquerade as anthropological investigations or medical texts. The prolific pornographic publisher Charles Carrington (pseudonym of Paul Ferdinando) published his smut in scholarly disguise: a typical example would be his prurient and extremely racist *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology* (1896). Carrington marketed his books as 'medical, folk-lore and scientific works'. Other code-words popular amongst nineteenth century pornographers were 'esoteric customs', 'unusual' practices, and 'exotic' stories.

Such framings point to the close relationship between pornography and the expansion of the empire with its 'civilising mission'. Imperial civil servants joined with academically-minded scholars of the London Anthropological Society to discuss 'native customs' in a seemingly respectable manner while privately circulating pornography depicting the whipping of female slaves and young boys. The members of The Cannibal Club positioned pornography as part of the imperial enterprise of 'discovery' (otherwise known as invasion). Xenophobia was at the heart of this pornography. Photographs of topless 'native' women could escape the censor in the way that identical photographs of 'white women' could not. Black and brown people of all sexes could be objectified in 'travel' postcards without the censor becoming agitated. These images contained explicit depictions of genitalia and pubic hair, which was unthinkable in other contexts. Censorship was particularly unlikely if the models were pictured in their 'native' habitats as opposed to 'staged' studios. It enabled a multitude of racist sins to be marketed under the guise of 'exploration' and 'tourism'. As historian Lisa Sigel observes, the 'exoticized Others' were always characterised as 'types', as opposed to individuals: they were 'Arab types', 'Haitian types', or 'Geisha types' offering up their passive and receptive bodies to the

white, imperial, male gaze.

The most notorious of these pornographers was Sir Richard Burton, writer, linguist, explorer, and orientalist who memorably had himself circumcised in preparation for a covert pilgrimage to Mecca. In the 1880s, Burton was responsible for the unexpurgated translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* and *Supplement Nights*, which are commonly referred to as the *Arabian Nights*. His viciously racist translation lingered on so-called 'Arab' sexual practices, including sodomy, bestiality, and clitoridectomy. Although the volumes sold for the extraordinary price of 10 guineas, they incited the first *public* literary debate about pornography – a word that had only entered the English language in 1850. As Liberal MP John Morley (using the pseudonym 'Sigma') complained, this 'Oriental muck heap' was pornography masked as 'scholarship and culture'. Only by such deception could the book be found on the 'unsullied British breakfast table'.

Orientalist racism remains strong in British pornography. Black and Asian women are fetishized while male Asian pornographic stars are feminised. This consumption of the bodies of 'Others' are part of their exclusion from citizenship or even full humanity. In the words of Mona Sakim in her essay 'Stripping While Brown', 'in the spaces of commercial intimacy, it is never just a body that is bought or sold'.

Even more common than the promotion of pornography as 'anthropology', 'exploration', or 'travel' was its marketing as a manual for doctors, surgeons, and other health professionals. For example, the medical textbook by John Robertson entitled *On Diseases of the Generative System* (published in 1811) was reissued in 1824 by John Joseph Stockdale (using the pseudonym 'Thomas Little') as a pornographic text under the title *The Generative System of John Robertson*. This lewd version included seven images that were not present in the original manual. One of these plates was a close-up, obscene image of a vulva, without any of the usual distancing mechanisms typical of medical drawings. Similarly, the seventeenth century classic *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (which I discussed in my talk at Gresham College on 'Pleasure') underwent numerous pornographic makeovers. As the anonymous author of an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* admitted in 1867, 'Many medical works and many law books contain matter which is grossly obscene; so do many classical books – Ausonius, Juvenal, Aristophanes, and many others'. He agreed that such publications were legitimate 'because the interests of medicine, law, and classical literature require it'. However, circulating texts containing indecencies within *professional* circles was one thing; it was quite different for pornographers to select 'every foul passage in the authors we have named', translate them into 'broad English', and sell them 'in a penny pamphlet to boys in the street'. Such publications were 'revolting' and licentious.

As with the marketing of pornography as 'anthropological' literature, the distinction between 'decent' and 'dirty' books depended on the class and professional respectability of readers. This focus on the socio-political *class* of readers has pervaded pornographic commentary. It was what distressed writer Pamela Johnson when she attended the 1966 trial of Moor's murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley (whom I discuss as part of my 'Evil Women' series at Gresham College). Johnson maintained that the 'swinging sixties' had cultivated a milieu of 'total permissiveness', which was never a healthy thing for 'ill-educated', but not 'stupid', young people such as Brady and Hindley. The spread of pornography masquerading as sexology texts (for example, the work of forensic psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing) was dangerous if read by the 'lower orders'. In Johnson's words, 'there are some books that are not fit for all people and some people who are not fit for all books'. Wealthy 'collectors' along with medical, legal, and academic professionals were positioned as impervious to the ill-effects of obscene publications compared with the uneducated 'masses'.

These highly classed debates continue (after all, pornographic 'collectors' continue to spend vast sums of money on lavishly produced, lewd 'art'). But most of the pornography consumed today is freely or cheaply available online. Twentieth- and twenty-first century pornography is often generated using everyday computers, video recorders, and phones with sophisticated digital cameras. The proliferation and increasing accessibility of digital technologies have not only enabled amateur pornography to expand exponentially, but has also resulted in new criminal behaviours, such as producing and distributing unauthorised images.

Technological shifts have significantly widened the contrast between different *genres* of pornography. On the one side, there has been a growth in homemade, low production-value, soft-porn. The commercial equivalent is the widely derided 'Mommy Porn', exemplified by *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its follow-up books, films, licensed sex-toys, and lingerie. These have become part of the cultural mainstream. On the other side, there has been a dramatic rise of extremely violent pornography, sometimes only accessible via the 'dark web'. These forms of pornography, which often depict child sexual abuse, bestiality, and rape, will not be discussed in this talk.

My final introductory remark concerns the relationship between pornography and prevailing sexual norms and practices. At a very basic level, the disjuncture between what appears in pornography and 'real life' sex

is vast. This was Billie Eilish's critique (cited at the start of this talk) when she complained that her frequent viewing of pornography from the age of twelve ruined her sex life. Pornography not only boosts unrealistic expectations (for instance, what a sexual body looks like or the 'truth' of orgasm), but also encourages harmful assumptions about what acts a 'sexy' person has no right to decline. There is a vast literature documenting these two problems in contemporary pornography.

There is a more interesting point to be made, however. Historians often attempt to extrapolate from pornographic texts and images to prevailing sexual morés. For example, one of the most influential historians of pornography – Stephen Marcus – based his analysis of Victorian sexuality on his reading of obscene texts. His foundational *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1966) established the canon of Victorian pornography. These were the bibliographies of collector Henry Spencer Ashbee, *My Secret Life*, *The Lustful Turk*, *Rosa Fielding; or a Victim of Lust*, *The Amatory Experiences of a Surgeon*, *Randiana*, and *The Romance of Lust*. From these texts, Marcus concluded that Victorian pornography exposed the 'unresolved psycho-sexual fantasies of a culture still in adolescence'. But, as historian Colette Colligan has explained in 'Marcus's Sources: Archives, Canons, Texts' (2017), this use of Victorian sources is problematic. It assumes that Victorian pornography was a highly responsive, consumer-driven industry, as it is today. Such an assumption is less appropriate when investigating pornography in previous centuries. For example, a large proportion of pornographic texts *consumed* in the nineteenth century had been *produced* decades earlier. The classic, pornographic orientalist text, *The Lustful Turk*, was first published in 1828 – but it kept being reprinted for another eighty years. Colligan found that even less popular pornographic texts had an average shelf life of one-quarter of a century. In Colligan's words,

"No one person was behind many of these [Victorian] texts, nor were they the reflection of one mind, nor of one culture or society. They were products of an illegal, secretive, and transnational textual subculture in which authorial intention and textual fidelity carried little premium. As such, they provide material evidence of the uneven movement of pornographic thought and writing through place and time. They point, too, to the cultural mix of sexual knowledge, practices, fantasies, and feelings that extended before and after the Victorians."

This means that we should be extremely cautious about drawing conclusions about a society's sexual lives from the pornography they are masturbating to.

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In the second half of this talk, I want to return to the point made at the start: it is wrong to assume that a *historically specific* form of pornography (that is, one that arose in the 1970s) is the standard by which *all* pornography should be judged. I turn now to two periods of British history where pornography looks very different to what it is today: these are, first, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and, second, the 1960s and early 1970s. In these periods, the dominant genre of pornography was a radical one that *challenged* as opposed to *bolstering* regimes of power.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth century British pornographers were politically committed to using bawdiness and obscenity to convey *explicitly* political messages against authoritarian power. Their purpose was to mock the Crown, Church, and State. For example, William Dugdale, one of the greatest pornographers of the nineteenth century, published works of political agitation alongside pornography. Indeed, he viewed the two genres as mutually reinforcing. Similarly, George Cannon (using the *nom de plume* Rev. Erasmus Perkins) was an anti-religious, radical polemicist for the rationalism of the Enlightenment who combined his attack on upper-class vice and 'old Corruption' with pornography. Robert Wedderburn, a leading Spencean revolutionary, argued for violent revolution while running a brothel and working as an agent for pornographic publishers. These explicitly political agendas coexisted alongside radical views about female sexuality. Much of this early pornography validated, even celebrated, female sexual autonomy. Women can be heard loudly seeking out their own pleasure, as well as the pleasure of male partners. The authorities vigorously sought to suppress such pornography, *less* because of the way pornography corrupted individual, *sexual* morals and *more* for its detrimental impact on the established *political* order. Thus, pornography during this period was not only (or even primarily) about titillation or 'arousing sexual feelings' (as the definition generally employed in the twentieth century has assumed), but was also explicitly radical, critiquing power structures in society.

This change from bawdiness as *political* to bawdiness as primarily concerned with *titillation* was a gradual one. Historians as different as Iain McCalman in *Radical Underworlds: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (1988), Lynn Hunt in her edited volume *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (1993), and Lisa Z. Sigel in *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (2002) generally date the decline from the 1830s, crucially (although not decisively) killed off by the Chartists, who sought a more 'respectable' image. As Sigel argues, by the Victorian period, the 'fluidity' and 'versatility' of eighteenth-century pornography, which merged descriptions of genitals and sexual practices with broader questions of beauty, sentiment, and religion, had faded away. It is not a coincidence that in the move towards a *less politicised* pornography, female narrators also disappeared. Hunt laments that fact that when 'the female narrator is effaced, so too is the ambiguity about the function of the representation of women'. She notes that 'in novels without a female narrator', female bodies become objects 'to be read about, viewed, and enjoyed by men', as opposed to active subjects in their own lives.

A particularly insightful way to track these shifts can be seen by examining different versions of the anonymously authored *The History of the Human Heart*, published in 1749, 1844, and 1968. It is significant that the original title – which emphasised the gender-free 'human heart' – was changed in later editions to the much more sexualised and gendered-male *Memoirs of a Man of Pleasure*. Historian Kathleen Lubey's analysis of these texts makes the point I alluded to earlier when discussing how to define 'pornography': when explored historically, 'pornography isn't consistently erotic' and it does not 'contain an unwavering imperative to arousal'. Indeed, Lubey points out, early pornography

"does not privilege 'sexual stimulation' over other perceptive possibilities.... It insists, in fact, on the coexistence of multiple responses at once, drawing on humor, intellectual debate, and cultural critique to emphasize the associative function of sex acts in narrative."

What changes can we see in the different editions of *The History of the Human Heart*? Crucially, the storyline was progressively pared back, and the text increasingly homed in on *genitals*. Dialogues between lovers were extensively cut. Feelings, trivialised. Female sexual pleasure was also curtailed. Gone are descriptions of the female protagonist's 'languid Eyes, that heavily panting Bosom, that glowing Blush' which 'all proclaim the God of Love triumphant'. Women became objects rather than subjects of pornographic narratives. Male sexual pleasure trumped all other forms.

By the 1968 edition of the now re-titled *Memoirs of a Man of Pleasure*, the book is marketed as though it belongs to the genre of pulp fiction. Unlike its predecessor, this edition jettisoned gender diffidence. The male hero becomes more 'self-possessed' and his 'seductive efforts' are no longer broken up by 'the bouts of uncertainty', as in earlier editions. The female heroines become 'quieter, flatter, less condemning of his scheming and duplicity'. Lubey observes that, by 1968, 'feeling, women's suffering, and men's abject proclamations of love' had come to be thought 'irrelevant or even threatening to the [male] reader's enjoyment'. The main thrust of the book becomes the assertion of a 'potent masculine heterosexuality'. For Lubey, this meant that, by 1968, 'the pleasure of pornographic reading' was

"not only narrow compared to the miscellaneous pleasures enjoyed by the eighteenth-century reader, but also that it requires a proud and unfailing hero. The hero, so unlike his eighteenth century forebear, falls short of ever admitting subjection to his beloved."

Unlike eighteenth and early nineteenth pornography, pornography increasingly insisted on upholding an unassailable male sexual agency. This is not to say that a subversive tradition disappeared entirely. Sigel reminds her readers that self-consciously political or satirical pornography limped along in the genre of sexually-comic postcards, which revelled in lampooning coprophagous male aristocrats and flatulent upper-class women. These astute caricatures of social elites were undercut, however, by the fact that these comic cards also displayed working people as possessing similarly ridiculous and rambunctious sexed bodies.

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The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw an explosion of pornography which was explicitly critical of the Crown, State, and Church. By the 1830s, this tradition has been significantly diminished. It was only revived, albeit with significant differences, 130 years later, in the 1960s. Unlike the politically progressive

pornographers of the earlier period who used sexual wit and obscenity to critique oppressive political *institutions*, in the 1960s a new group of pornographers turned their attention to the damaging impact of moral *ideologies* more directly. Even when they targeted the Church, this was not the established Church as ally to the aristocracy, but religion as propagating an *individually* sexually repressive moral code.

This new generation of pornographers set themselves in opposition to what historian Marcus Collins has called the pre-permissive pornography of 'alibis' – that is, the pin-ups, artists, and naturists who 'acted as fronts behind which the erotic might hide'. These 'alibis' had used innuendo and aesthetic puritanism to mask any sexual frisson, making them a 'effective form of self-censorship'.

In contrast, the 'new pornographers' both tapped into and helped to create the so-called 'permissive society'. Sex radicals, pornographers, and feminists were encouraged to believe that they were engaged in adjacent projects. Women as well as men had an interest in freeing up sexual desires, repudiating the nuclear family, and encouraging social freedoms. In the 1960s, the birth control pill and legalisation of abortion benefited both sexes. Pornographers and feminists welcomed the new freedoms. Both insisted that women were desiring sexual subjects, similar to men. In Collins's words, the producers of soft-porn magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, made

"every effort... to present female desire as normal and natural. In contrast to their pin-up predecessors, the models looked as though they actually wanted sex.... They were desiring as they were desirable. They defied the dichotomy between Madonna and whore. These were nice girls who did."

These new pornographers also avoided the 'objectification and violence that anti-pornography feminists claimed to be characteristic of all pornographic images of women'. After all, Collins' observes, 'any hint of coercion' would have clashed with the view by the 'new pornographers' that 'women wanted sex as much as men'. Instead of depersonalised sexual images of women abstracted from other aspects of their lives, they published detailed profiles of the models, including asking them about their views on politics and culture. These models denounced the 'double standard' of sexual behaviour; they spoke positively about birth control, abortion, divorce, and women's rights. The first cover story of *Mayfair* even referred to the rise of sexually liberated women as 'sexual suffragettes'. The 'new pornographers' were keen to reassure male readers that masculinity had a lot to gain in female sexual emancipation.

This was an even shorter-lived revolution than its predecessor. From the early 1970s, the positive message that had been propagated by the 'new pornographers' was being increasingly undercut by a revived misogynistic rhetoric. The tipping point was the first Women's Liberation Conference, held at Ruskin College in 1970. The sexually radical 'new pornographers' felt threatened. Was the feminist movement 'going too far'? Were women becoming a little too much 'like men'? Many of the same models who, in the 1960s, had been vocal about their support for a woman's right to equal pay and sexual freedom were now quoted as having changed their minds. They began lauding male 'chivalry'; passive femininity was reframed as empowering; demands for equal pay were judged unrealistic – and, anyway, it would hurt men ('You hear... nothing about equal pensions, or two-way alimony'). Porn stars such as Amber Dean-Smith and Paula Francis had earlier argued that 'we have as much interest in sex as men do', but by the 1970s, they began insisting that they desired 'strong men'. In the words of Bambi Lynn-Davies, 'a girl naturally hasn't the rights that a man has and wouldn't be happy if she did'.

Explicitly anti-feminist men's magazines began replacing female-friendly 'permissive' literature. The most notorious was the relaunch of *Men Only*, the best-selling men's magazine in the UK. In March 1971, Paul Raymond rebranded the magazine, promising to 'restore male dominance' and start a 'Gentleman's Liberation Movement'. Raymond claimed that 'as woman's public sensuality blossoms and spreads, so man's correspondingly withers and shrivels'. The 'Pill-chewing dolly bird' along with female sexual autonomy as represented, for example, by artificial insemination or the use of dildoes, were accused of castrating men 'as neatly as a vet castrating a sheep'. This was a dramatic turn-around from the 1960s. After all, in 1964, when Raymond first launched *King*, he had spoken positively about 'progress' between the sexes. By 1971, however, Raymond's leitmotif had become the neutering of men by feminists. Sexual 'permissiveness' had birthed women's liberation, and the 'new pornographers' were not pleased. As Collins' put it, 'while a "female emancipation" which expanded sexual opportunity was dandy, a "women's liberation" revolting against sexual exploitation was anything but'.

For feminists, the sexual revolution turned soar. While birth control and the acceptability of sex outside the institution of marriage had offered women liberating ways of thinking about their own sexual desires, it had not translated into more equitable treatment. As media studies scholar Carolyn Bronstein noted in *Battling*

Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986 (2011), by the early 1970s, feminists who had been keen advocates of the sexual revolution of the 1960s were disillusioned. Perhaps the whole movement had been a 'male revolution' all along, leaving 'sexism intact'? Where had men learnt to treat female sexual desires so dismissively, they asked? One answer was through the consumption of the massively expanded, commercialized pornography industry, including private clubs, sex theatres, dirty magazines on every newsstand, and sexualised television programmes. Feminists observed how the commercial sex industry had expanded dramatically – and in ways that were not empowering for women. For many feminists, the 1972 release of the pornographic and wildly popular film *Deep Throat* was symptomatic of the anti-womanist shift. This hard-core film, which starred Linda Boreman (aka Linda Lovelace), followed the sexual exploits of a woman whose clitoris was inside her throat. To achieve orgasm, she needed to learn the art of 'deep throat' fellatio. The film attracted large crowds of middle-class women and men who would have normally regarded the public consumption of pornography as 'dirty'. Almost overnight, pornography became chic. For feminists, however, it was the moment when they realized what men in the liberation movement actually thought about women. They recognised the 'new pornographers' as enemies of feminism, something that Collins' argued the 'new pornographers' themselves had already concluded about feminism. It was a moment in which feminism split between the anti-porn warriors and sex-positive amazons. The division remains a powerful one within twenty-first century feminism but, as I have tried to suggest, is a historically specific split which does not do justice to the full range of thinking about pornography.

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In this lecture, I have explored some of the diverse definitions and expositions of pornography in Britain and America from the late eighteenth century to the present. I have looked briefly at two periods of history where pornography explicitly attacked oppressive institutions identified as the Crown, State, and Church, along with their repressive sexual ideologies. My chief argument has been that pornography has not always objectified or silenced women. To assume that the essence of pornography is sexism is to adopt a historically specific, geographically located, and very modern definition of pornography as critiqued by white, educated, American, anti-porn feminists such as Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin.

My focus has been on dominant modes of pornography. However, it is important to acknowledge other, more underground traditions of pornography in which political questions have been foregrounded. Most notably, sexual and gendered minorities have employed pornography to experiment with their identities and, ultimately, forge communities with like-minded others. This was not new. After all, lesbian porn had flourished in the nineteenth century, for example. Classic lesbian texts of that period included *The Romance of Violette*, translated from the French into English in 1891. It chronicled sexually explicit lesbian sexual acts, including between Countess Odette and an actress called Florence. (Incidentally, although the English translation is sexually explicit, it excludes a lengthy passage in the original French text in which the two women use a ripe peach in genital play – perhaps there are certain practices 'beyond the pale' for British lesbians!). From the 1970s, pro-sex, lesbian pornography started to be produced by feminists like Pat Califia, Honey Lee Cottrell, Susie Bright, and Debi Sundahl. By reading or watching lesbian pornography, women who love other women learnt to recognize their own desires and sexual sufficiency.

Similarly, underground pornography produced during the gay male 'sex revolution' included powerful critiques of the authorities, it spread knowledge about homosexuality, it countered pervasive homophobia, and it provided community-enhancing templates for personal flourishing. Free speech was love speech. As John Champagne observes in *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories*, pornography is important to gay men's lives: 'In a culture that denigrates homoeroticism, pornography provides some of the only "positive" representations of gay sexuality', he writes. Even as late as the 1990s, homosexual pornography was one of the only sources of knowledge and representation of gay men. Gay porn was an important way men explored their own desires for other men.

This is not to celebrate minoritized cultures of pornography. After all, like most modern pornography, mainstream gay and lesbian porn have been biased in terms of skin colour, body size, and age, and (except for a handful of 'stars' such as Bobby Blake and Brandon Lee) tends to exoticization and orientalism. Pornography for heterosexual women also has limits. The feminist sex industry has grown immeasurably since the 1970s – as represented in shops like 'Toy Box' (which opened 1977) and the 1990s magazine *For Women*. But there are questions about the strong link between feminist pornography and capitalism. Who is coopting whom? Where is the radical punch in individualistic, capitalist-orientated, Power Feminism?

The question of cooption is an important one. Pornography loves boundaries – to be sexually arousing, it

requires transgression. This is why those early revolutionaries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were so dangerous for the authorities: they transgressed borders separating politics and criminality, respectability and public incitement, radicalism and bawdiness. They moved in and out of politics and criminality depending on their need for money, the extent of state repression, and existence of a market. As McCalman put it, they kept alive ‘a tradition of plebeian unrespectability and irreverence in the face of powerful countervailing forces. These obscure artisan ultraradicals and Grub Street hacks carried into Victorian society a ribald, saturnalian, anti-establishment culture’. They sought to change their society and were cheeky enough to use sex, sauciness, and orgiastic revelry to do so.

Finally, this should not lead us to invest too much power in pornography. It is only one site for the construction and maintenance of gendered identities. The three commentators with whom I began this talk – pornographic actress Linda Lovelace, feminist Robin Morgan, and singer/songwriter Billie Eilish – all had good reason to rail against pornography for harming them and their loved ones. Lovelace was coerced into working for a violent pornographer from the late 1960s; Morgan saw the perversion of the ‘sex revolution’ by misogynistic pornographers in the 1970s; Eilish is a twenty-first century musician in an industry dominated by sexually abusive producers and directors. But their experiences did not have to be inevitable. The oppressive forms that pornography took in their lives could be contested – and, in certain periods of history and in certain genres, *have been* contested. If we look beyond a historically and culturally specific mode of pornography, it is possible to identify pornography that resists the male gaze, includes the voices of women and minoritised peoples, and remakes pornography as an empowering genre. In my first lecture in this series ‘On Sex’, I concluded by quoting bell hooks. She died on the 15 December 2021 and I mourn her. This is why I want to cite her again today. Like me, she believed that pleasure is political. In her words, ‘our desire for radical social change is intimately linked with the desire to experience pleasure, erotic fulfilment, and a host of other passions’. Pornography can involve the political, social, and erotic labour of ecstatic bodies in forging more equitable worlds.

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