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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that an adequate feminist response to sexist pornography demands not just efforts to eradicate sexist beliefs, but also aesthetic counter-intervention at the level of taste. This view motivates support for feminist pornography. This paper takes the feminist pornography suggestion seriously by unpacking difficulties for the project. I begin by spelling out two views about what makes feminist pornography feminist: the ‘content view,’ and the ‘context view,’ and discuss what I take to be existing arguments for the latter. I then present two objections to the context view: the first focuses on how we characteristically interact with pornography (as a masturbatory aid), the second challenges the value of authenticity upon which much feminist pornography rests. If these arguments are correct, then there are serious flaws with feminist pornography as it is commonly conceived. I close with a brief suggestion of an alternative approach rooted in feminist solidarity.

Taking Feminist Pornography Seriously

A. W. Eaton has persuasively argued for what she calls a ‘sensible anti-porn feminism’, that is, a feminism that takes seriously the idea that, when used regularly as masturbation material, pornography acts on us by habituating our sentiments into particular patterns of desire, cultivating our ‘erotic taste’.¹ This argument is grounded in a long tradition in aesthetics which is interested in the power of art to shape our moral sentiments. When our desires are trained on inegalitarian representations of sex, this should be of real concern for feminists and, furthermore, it suggests that an adequate response demands more than work at the conscious level to eradicate sexist beliefs, but also intervention at the level of desire, at the level of taste. This motivates the turn towards feminist pornography which can intervene at the level of desire, training the viewer’s erotic taste instead on egalitarian representations of sex.² This paper aims to take this suggestion seriously by unpacking acute difficulties for feminist pornography as a modality for redressing the harms associated with mainstream sexist pornography. My discussion will proceed as follows: in §1, I reconstruct the argument in favour of feminist pornography; in §2, I spell out two ways one might think about how to delineate feminist pornography: the content view and the context view, and present the philosophical case for preferring the latter; in §3, I make two objections to the context view, the first focused on the use of pornography as masturbation material, the second focused on challenging the value of authenticity which guides the work of many feminist pornographers. The upshot is that the context view, if my arguments are sound, cannot stand alone. At the very

least, its rehabilitation would demand merging it with elements of the content view. I close, finally, with a brief suggestion that there may be good reasons to centre feminist pornography around the alternative value of solidarity, and that this value would lend itself more naturally to the content view of feminist pornography.

1. WHY FEMINIST PORNOGRAPHY?

Since its peak in the 1970s/80s, the era in which the so-called feminist sex wars played out, the anti-pornography stance has progressively fallen out of favour amongst feminists, though it has started to see a revival in recent years. Early anti-porn feminists were seen as anti-sex, repressive, and carceral in their logic and were therefore readily displaced by a sex-positive position that embraced and celebrated women's supposedly liberated sexuality in mainstream feminist consciousness. Nevertheless, several feminist philosophers have made efforts to rehabilitate the anti-porn stance, saving some of its key insights, while letting go of its more unsavoury elements.³ A commonality shared amongst these philosophers engaged in the rehabilitation project has been the rejection of, or at least a cautionary stance towards, the earlier feminist predilection for recourse to legal modes of redress for the harms to women associated with pornography. Their reasons for this range from worries about censorship, reservations about the evidence for direct causal links between pornography and violence, considerations of the limitations of the law to redress the kinds of harms in question, the concern that legal machinery can discursively tie women to victimhood, and the desire not to promote carceral solutions which disproportionately harm those women who are already the most vulnerable.

A. W. Eaton is among those prominent feminist philosophers who have engaged in this rehabilitation project. To bring the anti-porn position up to date, avoid common objections to the position, and recommend it to contemporary feminists, she has persuasively argued that feminists should adopt what she calls a 'sensible anti-porn feminism' (APF).⁴ A sensible APF is not anti-all pornography, but rather, anti-*inegalitarian pornography*, that is, sexually explicit representations that eroticise relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterised by gender inequity.⁵ A sensible APF is, in turn, committed to a version of the harm hypothesis which states that such inegalitarian pornography shapes the attitudes and behaviour of its consumers in ways that are harmful to women.⁶ Eaton argues, however, that a weakness of older anti-porn feminisms has been the under-specification of this hypothesis, hence she endeavours to spell it out in more detail. She begins from the basic assumption that our society at large is marked by unjust gender inequality, and that this inequality is not natural but sustained by social practices. She then points out that aspects of

this inequality have widespread erotic appeal and that this erotic appeal, too, is not natural but fostered and maintained by many kinds of representations, from advertisements to movies.⁷ She is careful to make clear that, of course, the gender inequality itself is not maintained solely by such representations, rather that eroticising the norms and trappings of gender inequality is one effective way to promote it.

Pornography clearly trades in these very representations. Indeed, it is perhaps the most powerful of the bunch in that it contains the most vivid sexual representations explicitly directed towards generating arousal in viewers. Inegalitarian pornography works on two levels here: at the level of its representational content, it depicts women deriving sexual pleasure from subordination, and, at the level of its presentation, this subordination is staged in a way aimed at producing sexual arousal in the consumer. These two features function to *endorse* the unequal relations represented in inegalitarian pornography through the mechanism of eroticisation.⁸ The conclusion that gets us the harm hypothesis goes as follows: by using representations of women's subordination in service of the powerful affective response of sexual arousal, inegalitarian pornography is especially well-placed to lead viewers to internalise inegalitarian views about gender that, in turn, contribute to the maintenance of a system which denies women the ability to develop and exercise all of their important capacities and go out and pursue their interests in the world.⁹ This sensible APF does not object to pornography on grounds of obscenity but on grounds of harm to women. It also doesn't overstate the causal power of pornography, restricting its operation to one amongst many forces involved in the reproduction of gender inequality. A sensible APF understands that inegalitarian pornography stands as one point on a pernicious feedback loop between sexist attitudes, sexist social arrangements and sexist representations. Sexism, as Eaton puts it, 'has many homes', but one of the important dimensions along which it operates is through its organisation of 'erotic taste': what we find sexy and attractive. And it is here that pornography is particularly powerful.

The version of the harm hypothesis that a sensible APF relies upon is one based on an aesthetic model, rooted in a much broader tradition in aesthetics which tracks the power of representations to affect our emotions and moral lives. On the aesthetic model, representations can shape our sentiments by presenting some feature of the world, or some state of affairs, under a certain evaluative light. For Berys Gaut, for example, an artwork can manifest a moral attitude by using various artistic techniques to prescribe certain emotional responses to that which it depicts.¹⁰ For Noël Carroll, a narrative artwork like a novel or a film can shape our sentiments by 'criterially prefocusing' the events depicted. This is to say that the author or moviemaker does the work our emotions usually do in the real world to organise situations we encounter. By using

artistic techniques to select which features we will find salient about the depicted events, they make accessible primarily the emotional appraisal of those events they desire us to have.¹¹ If an artwork is successful in eliciting the prescribed emotional responses in audiences, then the audience comes to see the situation presented as *warranting* our emotional response. These emotional responses can then, in turn, colour how a person goes on to perceive similar situations out in the world.¹² Of course, this is not guaranteed, but it is certainly possible. If a particular situation as it is represented in the artwork warrants some response, then it is not such a reach to imagine that a similar situation in one's day-to-day life warrants that response too.

This is the broad aesthetic picture that Eaton models her account of pornography on, but she also develops an Aristotelian account which is meant to be specific to pornographic representations which convey 'the freshness of immediate experience'.¹³ On Aristotle's understanding of habituation, we can acquire a standing disposition to feel the right way about some object or situation by repeatedly experiencing the right kind of emotion to the right degree of intensity in response to that object or situation. This is a way to train our sentiments such that we come to be disposed to always feel the right way, that is, for him, the moral way, about some object. Eaton proposes that when pornography is used repeatedly as masturbation material, the viewer can become habituated into feeling that all those situations depicted are erotic.¹⁴ The problematic situations she has in mind, of course, are those involving the subordination of women, in which cases, viewers become habituated into finding inegalitarian representations of sex to be erotic. This, then, is the model of how pornography can come to do harm to women that Eaton recruits for her sensible APF: it is an aesthetic, Aristotelian model.

Most importantly for our purposes here, she argues, in turn, that an aesthetic-cum-Aristotelian problem demands an aesthetic-cum-Aristotelian solution. Appreciating the force of her foregoing argument as an aesthetic argument requires understanding that sentiments, or matters of taste, 'fly under the rational radar'.¹⁵ This means that purely cognitive solutions, such as the demand for better sex education, will not cut the mustard. As Eaton puts it: 'we cannot argue or educate ourselves into or out of finding something likeable or unlikeable, attractive or disgusting, sexy or unerotic'.¹⁶ This is the reasoning behind Eaton's suggestion of feminist pornography. Feminist pornography is a way of responding to the problem presented by the harm hypothesis that takes seriously the fact that representations act on us at the level of taste, and that especially vivid representations can habituate us into certain tastes when repeatedly engaged with.

Eaton argues that feminists have too often focused on beliefs to the exclusion of taste which is potentially an equally powerful motivator of action. People are often reluctant to interrogate

taste because it can seem simply pre-given and therefore beyond one's control. For example, it doesn't seem to be the case that we can simply choose what to find sexy. However, this should not prevent us from asking questions about our tastes—especially our collective tastes, such as an overwhelming collective taste for dominance in men and submissiveness in women—especially because they can contribute to the maintenance of unjust social structures. Eaton's argument suggests that an erotic taste for gender inequality can be cultivated by engagement with inegalitarian pornography. If we judge gender inequality to be unjust, then it seems that our collective taste for it stands in need of transformation. This means that to move towards gender equality demands organising our sentimental lives around it.¹⁷ One way to do this, Eaton argues, is to engage with feminist pornography that cultivates an erotic taste for egalitarian sex. Enacting this transformation is a crucial part of any movement toward gender justice because, she tells us, 'so long as gender inequality has sex appeal, we will continue to vigorously pursue it'.¹⁸ Here now we have our answer to the question: why feminist porn? In short, feminist pornography aims to shape the erotic taste of its viewers in the direction of gender equity so that our collective erotic taste no longer functions to maintain unjust social relations and structures characterised by gender inequality.

2. CONTENT OR CONTEXT?

At this stage, one is likely to wonder what exactly counts as feminist or 'egalitarian' pornography. Eaton provides us with some negative and some positive criteria. I will list just a selection on each side. On the negative side: feminist pornography does not include (i) representations of non-consensual violence; (ii) expressions of contempt for women; (iii) sexist stereotypes; plus, feminist pornography is (iv) not organised around men's orgasms.¹⁹ On the positive side: (i) women are presented as subjects of pleasure and desire; and (ii) are portrayed in active roles as initiators and guides of sexual encounters; (iii) women's genuine pleasure is foregrounded e.g. women receive prolonged oral sex; (iv) scenes involve dominant women and submissive men; (v) women are represented as powerful and physically strong.²⁰ Many of these criteria at first appear to exclude the representation of specific *content*. Eaton, for example, cites men ejaculating on women's faces as something that is generally avoided in feminist pornography. The positive example of scenes involving women receiving oral pleasure is another example of what appears to be a content-based criterion.

However, some of the other criteria are fuzzy to the extent that it is not clear if any specific content should be included or excluded on their basis. The most controversial content case, as Eaton acknowledges, is the case of representations of rough sex and BDSM. One might wonder

if such content counts as, for example, expressing contempt for women. Certainly, there is, at the very least, an intuitive pull to the thought that a representation of a man hitting a woman, or penetrating a woman who is gagged and bound, would be a representation that expresses contempt for women. This is the view that Rebecca Whisnant expresses with some consternation in her discussion of what counts as feminist pornography. She asks:

‘...if celebratory eroticized depictions of female pain, abject submission, and even violence against women need not disqualify something as feminist pornography, what exactly is left?’²¹

For Whisnant, then, clearly there must be at least some content that is off-limits for feminist pornography worth the name. This point of view, which has at least a reasonable degree of intuitive force, expresses the central thrust of what I will call the ‘content view’ regarding how we should delineate what counts as feminist pornography. On this view, feminist pornography should be delineated according to its content: what makes it feminist is its inclusion and exclusion of the right sort of representational content. I should clarify that this view is clearly a normative one. A purely descriptive account would have to account for the fact that a great deal of pornography which is described as feminist out in the world does in fact contain content of the kind Whisnant bemoans.

An alternative viewpoint claims instead that what matters most is not content but *context*. On this view, there is no specific content that should disqualify a particular pornographic work from counting as an instance of feminist pornography. Instead, what is important is that any given scene, sex act or position is placed in its proper narrative context. The thought goes that, with the right context set up, even representations of women’s ‘abject submission’ can count as egalitarian representations. The required context is usually considered to be one involving the consent of all parties and the explicit representation of the woman’s own desire for the sex act, perhaps because she wishes to indulge in a sexual fantasy. This appears to be the view of many practicing feminist pornographers, and it is also the approach that Eaton gestures towards. I quote her in full here as this is a passage I will return to:

‘Can feminist pornography handle a taste for rough sex and BDSM? The answer, I think, is yes, but these things must be handled with considerable care. One example is Tristan Taormino’s *Rough Sex* series where each vignette begins with a lengthy interview with the performers. In these interviews, the performers discuss their actual fantasies and explain how they establish trust with their partners and how they both establish and test their own boundaries. This *establishes a rich context* for the fantasies

that follow, making it clear that the dominance, submission, and violence are not only consensual but actually *emanate from the performers themselves*.²² (emphasis added)

Here, we see Eaton endorsing the idea that the right kind of context can, we might say, act as a normative transformer for what would otherwise be sexist representations. We also first get a glimpse here of the common idea that part of the normative story involves whether representations include the genuine or authentic desires of the performers themselves. To this idea we will return at greater length shortly.

The view I am describing here, and calling the ‘context view’, has recently been philosophically developed and defended in more detail by Richard Kimberley Heck.²³ Heck argues that, in order to properly appreciate the possible ways in which a pornographic film can shape or misshape attitudes about sex, we must take feminist pornography films seriously *as films*. This involves, crucially, understanding the place of any particular scene or sex act in its proper narrative context. As an example, Heck describes the plot of the well-known feminist pornographer, Erika Lust’s, film *The Good Girl*.^{24,25} At first blush, the film appears to rehearse a familiar, tired, sexist porn trope: the woman, Alex, has sex with the pizza delivery guy, Paulo, and, at the end of it all, he ejaculates on her face. However, the film is not a rehearsal but a subversion: the content is transformed by the context. Alex is in fact uncomfortable with her habit of being ‘the good girl’ and so decides to do something crazy that she has fantasised about and invite the pizza delivery guy into her apartment. Alex is confident, while Paulo is more nervous and awkward. The ejaculation scene at the end, too, is not uncritically rehearsed. Rather, after a session of sensual intercourse, Alex, continuing to endorse her outlandish fantasy asks Paulo to ‘cum in my face *like in porn movies*’, Paulo obliges, and, in the end, she laughs at the ridiculousness.²⁶ The meta aspect of this line drives home the subversion of the trope as opposed to its endorsement. Here, we see an example of how even the most familiar sexist tropes from mainstream pornography can apparently be normatively transformed by context.

Heck’s argument for the importance of context is an important one. However, for Heck, taking feminist pornography seriously seems to amount only to taking feminist porn films seriously *as films*. I want to ask, rather: what is required to take feminist pornography seriously *as pornography*, that is, as a particular species of representation with the power to profoundly shape our erotic taste without our rationally assenting to its doing so. I also want to suggest that taking feminist pornography seriously demands appreciating that feminist porn films are aesthetic objects out there in the actual world, created by and consumed by imperfect people whose erotic tastes have surely been subject to a good deal of (mis-)shaping already at the point of production or

consumption. From this perspective, even taking Heck's arguments on board, it remains troubling to me that feminist pornography often reproduces the very same kinds of representational content we find in run-of-the-mill, mainstream, sexist porn. I am thus going to argue that taking feminist pornography seriously demands going further than Heck goes, into the realm of excavating our desires more thoroughly and towards a consideration of why we might want to attempt to transform them collectively. To these questions, let's now turn.

3. TWO PROBLEMS FOR THE CONTEXT VIEW

Above, I have sketched two available views about feminist pornography which I'm calling the 'content view' and the 'context view'. In light of its recent defence, I now wish to raise two objections to the context view. Under the context view, any specific representational content—e.g., a sex position, a sex act etc.—that we find in a feminist pornography film can be normatively transformed by its being placed in the right context. Paradigmatically, the normative transformer is consent, though we see that other facts about the context can also be relevant such as the meta dimension of the facial ejaculation scene in *The Good Girl*. This has the upshot that there can only be very limited blanket restrictions as to what representational content a feminist porn film can contain and still be worthy of the name, the only obvious blanket restriction being representations of non-consensual sex acts. There is, however, an intuitive tension inherent in this view which is captured well by the question asked by Whisnant above. Namely, I would wager that many people would think it at least a little odd to call eroticised representations of (even consensual) women's pain and submission instances of *feminist* pornography. In this section, I want to develop this tension and move beyond just the intuitive resistance we might feel to spell out two principled reasons we might be legitimately concerned about the tenability of the context view.

(i) Pornography as masturbation material.

As I mentioned a moment ago, for Heck, taking feminist pornography seriously involves primarily taking feminist porn films seriously *as films*. I suggested that we should instead take feminist pornography seriously by taking feminist porn films seriously *as pornography*. What do I mean by this? To answer that question, I invite the reader to recall precisely why Eaton calls for feminist pornography, conceived of as an aesthetic solution to an aesthetic problem, in the first place. She does this to call attention to the fact that pornography can function to shape our erotic taste by flying under our rational radar. Specifically, because pornography is vivid enough to convey the 'freshness of immediate experience', and because pornography is engaged with repeatedly as masturbation material, it can act upon the viewer as to firmly habituate them into dispositions to

find certain things erotic and other things unerotic. This last fact, that pornography is engaged with as masturbation material, is what I think must be taken seriously in order to take feminist porn films seriously *as pornography*. When people watch porn, they watch it to become aroused and to masturbate. In other words, one might think, people don't tend to watch porn for the context but for the content! That isn't to say that when we watch porn, we are entirely uninterested in the narrative context—that certainly isn't right—rather, it is just to say that the narrative context isn't usually the reason why we're there. That is because we don't generally engage with porn movies the way we engage with *movies*, rather we engage with them in the distinctive way that we engage with *pornography*.

By this, I mean that we go to a pornographic movie specifically looking to be aroused by representational content of explicit sex acts which we can make use of as a kind of masturbatory aid or tool. This means that, if the narrative context gets in the way of our goal of arousal, we will tend to turn off the porn film and find another one. Then again, this alone doesn't necessarily suggest that context is not important. In fact, one might easily object, it seems to suggest that context *is* an important ingredient in getting us to arousal. Furthermore, by the same token, one may point out that the wrong kind of content, say, the representation of a sex act which one finds personally unerotic, can also have us turn off a porn film and go looking for another one. This gives us the result that both content and context are important ingredients in our engagement with pornography, plus, the result that the wrong kind of context or content can equally get in the way of our arousal. So why is it, then, that I want to re-assert the primacy of content?

To be clear, I am happy to concede that context *is* a part of the story, and that context can often be a part of what is arousing about a pornographic film, therefore making context relevant, to a non-trivial degree, to our purposes in engaging with pornography *as pornography*. However, I want to maintain that content is in the driver's seat for two reasons.²⁷ One of these reasons, the first, is sketchier than the other. First, it seems to me that there is something uniquely arousing about pornographic movies that is related to their status as pornography: roughly, that there is something erotic about the act of viewing explicit sex acts on a screen in and of itself. Often, when we watch porn, part of the arousal is supplied by the taboo nature of watching it and planning to masturbate to it in the first place. Watching porn is not something everybody talks about, but it is something many, if not most, people *do*, and they often do so furtively, or even somewhat ritualistically. The reason for this is entirely based upon the content you expect you will find in a pornographic movie: content which is explicit, not 'family-friendly', 'not suitable for work'. If I'm roughly right about this, then considering pornography *as pornography* means considering that pornography is all about its representational content in a way that movies just aren't. At the very

least, this seems to be the way that pornography primarily operates in the actual world as things currently stand. It is perhaps worth noting here that I suspect there could be a robust case to be made in favour of not only making better pornography but also transforming the entire way in which we interact with and use pornography. Were these things to be pursued in tandem, the point I have just made would no longer necessarily hold and the context view might gain more ground. However, this takes us into quite different territory and hence I will set aside any further discussion of this possibility for now.

Let's turn now to the second reason I think we must focus on content, and it is this reason in which I feel more confident. Given that we go to pornography looking for a specific kind of content, and given that, on Eaton's model, pornography operates beneath the level of rational control, I think that subtleties of context can be easily lost on us when watching a pornographic film. In any porn film that is good *pornography*, the response prescribed by the film is arousal, or, in other words, the work has been criterially prefocused for us such that we are supposed to find what we see erotic and arousing. Analysed as such, we must ask the question: what is the *object* of the prescribed response of arousal? The proponent of the context view is going to say that the object is the sex act or situation in its full and proper context. For them, the object should be given a level of description that captures important contextual factors. So, for example, the object of the prescribed response of arousal in *The Good Girl's* facial scene is going to be something like Alex's-asking-for-Paulo-to-ejaculate-on-her-face-consensually-and-in-good-fun. But we can easily redescribe the object of the prescribed response as simply Paulo-ejaculating-on-Alex's-face, or even, man-ejaculating-on-woman's-face. It is my contention that when pornography is being used as masturbation material, the more fine-grained level of description might not be operative, or, more modestly, that the more fine-grained level of description isn't going to be operative for a substantial and important subset of viewers whose erotic taste has already been trained on representations of inegalitarian sex in mainstream porn. If what we care about when we watch pornography is that we get off, and if the full context isn't needed for us to reach that goal (or isn't needed for a substantial number of viewers to reach that goal), I worry that it falls out of the picture. This suggests that the project of rehabilitating misshapen erotic tastes demands feminist pornographies that focus not only on shifting contexts, but focus, at least equally, on transforming representational content too.

Another way of pressing this point, which might be more controversial, is to challenge the idea that context generally, and *consent* in particular, can really do the work we ask of it when we imagine it as a normative transformer in the context of pornography. The one content restriction we noted that could firmly be placed on feminist pornography was on representations of non-

consensual sex acts. This is, of course, a hugely significant virtue of feminist pornography as compared with mainstream pornography. Much has been written about how mainstream inegalitarian pornography perpetuates the deeply harmful idea that women desire to be raped or coerced into sex, potentially creating a taste for forced or coerced sex. This is something that feminist pornography rules out, even on the context view. However, it is worth pointing out that the context view does not rule out in principle the representation of women and men engaging in the fantasy of forced sex, or in the controversial practice within the BDSM community of engaging in so-called ‘consensual non-consent’ (CNC). Nor does it rule out representations of people engaging in styles of rough sex and BDSM that look a lot like what forced sex looks like in mainstream porn. One should remember, of course, that even in the mainstream pornography, women generally come around in the end, when they eventually orgasm proving that they wanted to be force-fucked all along. The point here is not to suggest that BDSM and rough sex are necessarily inegalitarian ways of having sex, rather, the point is to ask whether *pornographic representations* of these ways of having sex may contribute to the development of an erotic taste for inegalitarian sex in the viewer regardless.

More specifically, the question I think it is incumbent upon us to ask is what ideas these kinds of representations could risk perpetuating about women, even when well-intentioned. It is true that representations of rough sex and BDSM (including CNC) do not perpetuate the idea that women really do want to be raped in the way that mainstream pornography often does. Nevertheless, such representations might perpetuate the idea that all women fantasise about being raped and that they may, for that reason, consent to exploring such a fantasy. Women, of course, do have such fantasies in high numbers, but what is important to remember is that this does not entail that all those women have any interest in playing them out. Clearly, a not insignificant number of women do wish to play out such fantasies in a safe environment, but it seems likely that, for many women, playing out such a fantasy would be a deeply psychologically troubling, even traumatic, experience. It is also worth pointing out that, in order to play out such a fantasy safely, one would only be able to do so with a highly trustworthy partner, not just anyone. Even more worryingly, there’s the possibility that such representations risk suggesting not only that women have such fantasies but that they *should* have them *and* want to explore them, lest they be considered repressed, ‘vanilla’, or too much of a ‘good girl’.

One might object here that excluding BDSM and rough sex from feminist pornography for the kind of reasons I have suggested is going to exert a shaming effect on all those women who do fantasise about this kind of sex, and strongly desire to engage in this kind of sex with trusting partners.²⁸ It is, of course, extremely difficult to simply change what one sexually desires, and a

total lack of representation of rough sex and BDSM in feminist pornography would seem to wrongly exclude a large subset of women from enjoying it, even resulting in their feeling ashamed of, and alienated from, their sexual fantasies and desires. Here, I think we confront a very serious dilemma, and it is a dilemma to which I do not pretend to have an easy resolution.

On the one hand, I am very sympathetic to this objection, and agree that a kind of feminist pornography which results in a non-trivial number of women feeling sexually ashamed seems like it is not a feminist pornography at all. On the other hand, I wonder what feminism is if it is not fundamentally committed to the eradication of rape and sexual violence in all its forms, and if this effort needs to involve a somewhat painful process of transforming our collective erotic taste, then some residue of shame and alienation might be the price which must be paid. After all, when one learns to live under patriarchy, one finds comfort and makes meaning using the resources one has to hand. It would, therefore, be unsurprising if the process of overcoming the trappings of patriarchy would be attended also by a feeling of disorientation, even on the part of those whom the process aims ultimately at liberating. In other words, as one chips away at patriarchal forms of life, one also chips away at the things which those forms of life made meaningful. When this is borne in mind, one might interpret this dilemma as a classic case of a double bind. Under such an interpretation, the fact that both possible avenues cause hurt to women can be understood as itself yet another unhappy manifestation of the oppression to which we are subject as a class. I think the double bind metaphor is illuminating and helps us to see that there are hard, unavoidable choices to be made here. As I see it, the choice to restrict what representational content is permissible in feminist pornography worth its name might just be one such hard choice.²⁹

(ii) The problem of authenticity: Self-expression or confession?

My next objection asks us to zoom out and think about feminist porn films as objects in the world created by real performers and directors whose own erotic tastes have already been, to a significant extent, pre-formed at the time of production. To do this, I want to call attention to one of the central values which guides the work of many feminist pornographers and performers, namely, the value of authenticity. While a commitment to the value of authenticity is not ubiquitous amongst feminist pornographers and performers, it is certainly central to the normative story for many of them.³⁰ For example, in a paper which interrogates the value of authenticity in feminist porn, Madison Young acknowledges that ‘within the feminist porn movement we have clung to the term "authentic" as a consistent ethical ingredient in what makes feminist porn, well, feminist’.³¹ Indeed, the self-proclaimed goal of much of the work feminist pornographers do is to try to capture authentic expressions of desire, pleasure and sexuality. To do this, feminist

pornographers will work closely with performers to find out what and who they really desire to produce more authentic results. One way this is sometimes achieved is by using performers who are real couples. Another way is to ask performers for lists of other performers they personally find sexy, and pair them together. Feminist pornographers will also try to base scenes around the performers' own actual desires and fantasies, their favourite sex acts and positions and so on. It is relevant to note that Eaton, too, gestures towards authenticity at the end of the passage I quoted above. She writes that part of what makes representations of rough sex acceptable in feminist pornography is that the context establishes that the sex acts represented 'emanate from the performers themselves'. So, plausibly, authenticity is functioning as part of the normative story for the feminist philosopher as well as the feminist pornographer.

A first thing to point out immediately is that a commitment to the value of authenticity also does not demand any blanket restrictions on the representational content of feminist porn. The authentic desires of performers will provide local restrictions, but never global ones. In principle, it seems that performers might authentically desire any kind of sex act at all. The next step is to think about what kinds of things performers might actually authentically desire, accounting for their socialisation. Feminist pornographers and those who perform in feminist porn films are not people who have somehow escaped the world as it is, that is, one which is thoroughly saturated with mainstream pornography that trains our erotic taste on representations marked by gender inequality. What this means is that nothing about being committed to authenticity rules out the possibility of reproducing the very same tropes we find in mainstream pornography and, wherever that is the case, then my previous objection above is going to kick in.

Thus far, however, I've been using 'authenticity' in a fairly minimal sense to talk roughly just about things people actually choose, or things people say they desire. The contrast class for authentic cases here would just be things people don't desire and that they know they don't. We can presume that, in mainstream pornography, performers are very often doing things they don't choose or don't desire. However, people often mean something more robust than this by 'authentic' such that the appropriate contrast to draw is not between what one does and doesn't desire but, instead, between things one merely thinks they desire, and things they truly, authentically desire. I suspect that at least some of the feminist pornographers we're interested in have something more like this sense of 'authenticity' in mind. Feminist pornographers and performers, at least as I read many of them, are interested in capturing a more liberated, queer or edgy sexuality, freed from the constraints of mainstream ways of thinking about sex, such that the desires and pleasures they showcase are, in some deep way, more real or more authentic. Before I lay down a challenge to this perspective, I first want to acknowledge that I find this to be an

extremely admirable goal. It is certainly true that feminist porn is more authentic and more real than mainstream pornography in a meaningful way, and this is undeniably a virtue of feminist porn. Nevertheless, I maintain that there are reasons to remain cautious of this value of authenticity, and the limits of feminist pornography conceived in its terms.

To see why we might be suspicious of the value of authenticity, it is useful to turn to Foucault.³² Foucault gives us an historical account of a particular kind of power, namely, disciplinary power. Disciplinary power is not vested in specific identifiable individuals and institutions, rather, it can be understood as a system of management which is diffused across networks of social relations. What's important to recognise about disciplinary power is that it does not only externally constrain the agent but also constitutes the agent herself. Disciplinary power is productive insofar as it is the condition of possibility for exercising agency. Another way of phrasing the Foucauldian insight is to say that the agent, the individual, does not precede power. Rather, individuals are formed in and by relations of power. It is for this reason that, for Foucault, the privileging of so-called authentic selves, or authentic desires, is suspect. Such language is suspect because it suggests that there exists a fully formed and more genuine individual whose agency precedes power. Foucault is therefore highly critical of discourses which privilege the authentic self and its desires, and which compel us to constantly confess this self and its desires. Indeed, these discourses which compel our confession are themselves wrapped up in a process of what Foucault calls normalisation, that is, social mechanisms for taxonomizing, measuring and managing populations. The individual is, for Foucault, a product of these normalising regimes; it does not precede them.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that the individual is going to have the phenomenal experience of having a privileged and more real inner self. It is part of Foucault's project, however, to challenge this phenomenology and call it out as itself a product of disciplinary power. In her discussion of these Foucauldian ideas, Cressida Heyes puts the point eloquently when she says that 'the internalisation of normalising judgement can be experienced as inner depth'.³³ It is on this basis that I take the privileging of authenticity and authentic desires as a guiding principle for the production of feminist pornography to stand in need of scrutiny. There is a question to be asked about whether this privileging in fact feeds into the compulsion to confess and confess and confess. And what is it that we are compelled to confess but, perhaps, the internalisation of normalising judgement, the very product of disciplinary power, which we experience as inner depth. To put the point more concretely relative to the case at hand, the thought is this: the desires of both feminist pornographers and feminist porn performers are themselves products of a nexus of patriarchal power and so when they confess on screen even their most 'authentic' sexuality, they

might still fail to subvert the norms of gender inequality. And, in this context, these norms then become problematically framed as embedded in true, authentic, liberated sexuality.

I find a nod towards something similar in Nancy Bauer's discussion of the Beauvoirian challenge of self-expression. Beauvoir tells us that the real challenge for women as sexual beings is finding sexual self-expression that is not at once self-objectification. Given the ubiquitous portrayal of women as sex objects in mainstream pornography, it is challenging for women to express sexually as subjects. In fact, it might be that women find the experience of 'inner depth' precisely in the objectification as a result. To this very point, Bauer writes:

'Everywhere we turn we find images daring women of all sexual temperaments to revel in and express their fuckability, as though a woman's transforming herself into the ultimate object of desire should or could satisfy her need for other people to attend to the depth and breadth of her true self, even her true sexual self.'³⁴

This perhaps gets us to the crux of the worry. Feminist pornography often proclaims to celebrate authentic sexuality—the representation of such true sexual selves—but who is to say that such self-expression goes any further than self-objectification? If this argument is along the right lines, then it makes a lot of sense that there is not always a substantive difference in the representational content we find in feminist pornography as compared with what we find in mainstream inegalitarian pornography. The unique risk which attends the portrayal of such content in feminist pornography, however, is that, due to the framing in terms of authenticity, the normalisation may become even more deeply inscribed.

What this leads to is a different kind of challenge to the context view. It suggests that the privileging of authenticity in feminist pornography production is inadequate due to the logic of authenticity-talk that Foucault and Heyes expose. This has the result that relying on authenticity to appropriately fix the context seems like it isn't going to be able to do the required normative work. Most importantly, I argue that it suggests we need to go beyond authenticity, and specifically beyond the context view as it stands, if we are going to find aesthetic ways of disrupting the reproduction of patriarchal power matrices. The context view alone is simply not up to the task.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All of this seems to leave both the feminist pornographer and the feminist philosopher in a rather sticky situation, so to speak. If it is power all the way down, then how are we to break free and

produce feminist pornography that can realise the aim we set out with: to help to re-train viewers' erotic tastes on gender egalitarianism? I will close with a brief suggestion, the details of which I leave to future work. Perhaps what is required is a new organising value to replace the problematic value of authenticity in feminist porn-making. One value we might consider is that of feminist solidarity.³⁵ We started with the suggestion that an aesthetic problem required an aesthetic solution. However, our erotic taste is not singular but shared and so, perhaps, it is also true that a *collective* aesthetic problem requires a *collective* aesthetic solution. One principled way to commit to developing such a solution might be to have the production of feminist pornography be guided by the relational value of feminist solidarity.

Roughly, the thought is that, if a practice of porn-making were to be grounded in feminist solidarity, it would be incumbent upon the feminist pornographer to always work outwards from consideration of the vulnerability of women to sexual violence, and specifically, outwards from a consideration of the material and ideological conditions of those women who are *most* vulnerable to sexual violence. Furthermore, feminist solidarity would demand that feminist pornography be developed in consultation or conversation with a collective of some kind, seeking out and encouraging the voices and contributions of many different women from many different backgrounds to the extent that this is possible. This would be a kind of activist pornography that uses an aesthetic medium to work towards explicitly political ends.

It seems to me that grounding such a practice in this way would demand, at the very least, revising the context view such that some specific kinds of representational content would have to be ruled out due to their possible or probable downstream ideological and material effects. Where the organising value of authenticity lends itself more naturally to a context view of feminist pornography, the organising value of solidarity might thus lend itself more so to a content view. If such a view could be worked out more fully, I suggest it would require either rejecting the context view in favour of the content view or spelling out and endorsing a third view which merges elements of both. All things considered, we should always keep in mind that disciplinary power is not totalising but also always produces possibilities for resistance. This makes the question for feminist pornographers and philosophers, as I see it, that of how to move past mere empowerment and self-expression, even subversion, and towards realising possibilities for principled resistance.³⁶

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⁴ Eaton 2007.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.676.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.677.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp.678-80.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp.680-2.

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¹² Eaton, A. W. (2008). A Reply to Critics. *Symposia on Gender, Race, and Philosophy* 4 (2):1--11, p.3.

¹³ Eaton 2017, p.251.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp.250-252.

¹⁵ Eaton 2008, p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.2.

¹⁷ Eaton 2017, p.255.

¹⁸ Eaton 2008, p.2.

¹⁹ Eaton 2017, pp.253-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.254-5.

²¹ Whisnant, R. (2016). “But what about feminist porn?”: Examining the work of Tristan Taormino’. *Sexualization, Media, & Society*, 2, p.5.

²² Eaton 2017, p.255.

²³ Heck, Richard Kimberly (2021). *How Not To Watch Feminist Pornography*. *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1): Article 3. For a related line of defence see Comella, Lynn (2013), ‘From Text to Context: Feminist Porn and the Making of a Market’ in *The Feminist Porn Book*.

²⁴ See Heck 2021. pp.14-24.

²⁵ *The Good Girl*, Erika Lust, 2004.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Quoted p.18.

²⁷ I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comment encouraging me to clarify this point.

²⁸ I would again like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing this line of objection.

²⁹ It is important that I clarify here that I am not making any claims about what kinds of sex people should or should not engage in in their actual lives. Rather, I am evaluating here only what kinds of sex should or should not be represented in feminist pornography distributed to a public audience.

³⁰ For more critical perspectives on authenticity, see discussions in: Ward, Jane (2013), ‘Queer Feminist Pigs: A Spectator’s Manifesta’ in *The Feminist Porn Book*; Young, M. (2014). ‘Authenticity and its role within feminist pornography’, *Porn Studies* 1: 186–8; and Ashley, V. (2016). ‘Porn—artifice—performance—and the problem of authenticity’, *Porn Studies* 3: 187–90.

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³² Foucault, Michel (1990), *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*. Vintage Books.

³³ Heyes, Cressida J. (2007). *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.32.

³⁴ Bauer 2015, p.10.

³⁵ This seems to be something like what Amy Allen is gesturing towards at the end of her discussion of pornography and power. See Allen, Amy (2001). *Pornography and power*. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32 (4):512–531, p.527.

³⁶ I acknowledge that some feminist pornographers already conceive of their projects this way, my suggestion is that organising the production of feminist pornography around solidarity instead of authenticity might be one way to theoretically anchor this practice more broadly.