

# Knowing Pornography

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*This essay draws on my personal experience with pornography to explore how sexually explicit material helps construct men's sexuality in contemporary U.S. culture. From this personal narrative, I show how pornography was an important means of sex education in my life; constructed women as objects, which encouraged me to see women in real life that way; created or reinforced desires for specific acts; shaped and constrained my sexual imagination with its standardized scripts; reinforced racist stereotypes; and eroticized violence for me in a way that not only affected my sex life, but also gave me a sense of control over women.*

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History gets written with the mind holding the pen. What would it look like, what would it read like, if it got written with the *body* holding the pen? (Berman, 1990, p. 110)

In this essay, I<sup>1</sup> want to let my body hold the pen. I have spent much time in the past few years trying to be in my body as I have researched and written about pornography. I have concluded that, in conjunction with many other sources of information, I-in-my-body have insights into the role of pornography in the construction of male sexuality in contemporary U.S. culture.<sup>2</sup>

Part of the authority for that claim comes from a simple observation: I get erections from pornography. I take that to be epistemologically significant; my body understands the charge of pornography. Because I was raised in a sexist culture with few (if any) influences that mitigated that sexism, I am in a position to explore how that sexual charge is connected to the ideology of male dominance and female submission that is central in contemporary commercial pornography (Jensen, 1994).

I have focused on this embodied, personal approach partly in reaction to the scholarly literature on pornography, so much of which is written by men and is distinctly disembodied (for exceptions, see Abbott, 1990; Baker, 1992; Kimmel, 1990). Political tracts,

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law review articles, and reports of social science studies written by men rarely include any acknowledgment of the position of the author in a pornographic world, let alone an examination of what it means for how one comes to know about pornography. That kind of embodied exploration is rare because, as feminist theorists have long pointed out, in all those areas—philosophy, law, social science—emotional detachment and objectivity are seen as virtues. But that stance actually has repressed much of what we might know about pornography. As Berman (1990) puts it, “To leave your body and believe that you can still know anything at all is quite literally a form of madness” (p. 110). In that sense, many of the scholarly works on pornography are quite mad—misguided attempts to sever mind and body, reason and emotion that lead to less, not more, trustworthy knowledge.

This article investigates the question: Does mass-marketed commercial pornography play a role in the formation of a heterosexual man’s sexual values and practices? My hypothesis is that men’s use of pornography is one way in which men’s dominance over, and control of, women is sexualized and naturalized. My narrative method does not “prove” this, but attempts to explain how it has worked in my body. I conclude that my life provides support for the radical feminist critique of pornography summarized below. From there, I go on to discuss the value of embodied narratives, describe my own pornography use, and offer observations on pornography’s effects on me and men. The article concludes with some thoughts on the value and limits of such work.

## THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PORNOGRAPHY

The radical feminist antipornography critique views pornography as a kind of sexist hate literature, the expression of a male sexuality rooted in the subordination of women that endorses the sexual objectification of, and sexual violence against, women. In the 1980s, this view was written into an antipornography civil rights ordinance that was successfully passed in some cities, but rejected by the federal courts (see *American Booksellers v. Hudnut*, 1985). In that ordinance, pornography is defined as the “graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words” and identified as “a practice of sex discrimina-

tion" and a "systematic practice of exploitation and subordination based on sex that differentially harms and disadvantages women" (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988, pp. 138-142).

The harm caused by pornography can be summarized briefly as (a) the harm to women in the production of pornography, (b) the harm to women who have pornography forced on them, (c) the harm to women who are sexually assaulted by men who use pornography, and (d) the harm to all women living in a culture in which pornography reinforces and sexualizes women's subordinate status (Itzin, 1992; Russell, 1993a). My claims do not hinge on establishing a direct causal link between pornography and sexual violence; rather than talking of pornography as a cause, we can identify it as one important factor in sexual abuse and misogyny in general (Jensen, 1995b, 1995c).

This view of pornography comes out of a more encompassing critique of male sexuality in patriarchy that suggests male domination is the central dynamic in sexual relations between men and women, and sometimes between men and men or women and women (Cole, 1989; Dworkin, 1981, 1988; Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987, 1989). This critique argues not only against the most offensive violent pornography in which women are clearly abused but also asserts that "normal" male sexuality is rooted in male dominance. From this perspective, cultural products such as pornography work to naturalize male control, rendering a system of power and abusive practices less visible.

The feminist antipornography critique has been the subject of extended debate for two decades, with both civil libertarians and anticensorship/propornography feminists raising objections to underlying assumptions and empirical claims (e.g., Burstyn, 1985; Christensen, 1990; Segal & McIntosh, 1993). Although I do not want to minimize the intensity and complexity of the debate, I do not find the propornography position compelling in intellectual, personal, or political terms, and it is important for me to clearly anchor my work in the radical critique of pornography.

For the purposes of this discussion, I adopt the MacKinnon/Dworkin definition of pornography, which includes most of the pornography that is marketed as pornography—that is, sexual material sold in adult bookstores that uses women for the purpose of sexually exciting men. The focus of this article is heterosexual pornography. Much of the radical critique can also be applied to

gay pornography, but I will not pursue that here (see Kendall, 1993). Although the MacKinnon/Dworkin definition has been widely criticized, especially in the legal world, it is more than adequate here. It also is valuable to break away from the quest for a bright-line definition and talk instead about the pornographic continuum, which includes some images in mainstream media. I find elements of the pornographic—varying levels of hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence (Dworkin, 1988, pp. 265-267)—in everything from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue to snuff films.

### EMBODIED NARRATIVES

This article attempts to honor the feminist commitment to “the trustworthiness of your own body as a source of knowledge” and the possibility of “intersubjective agreement” (Frye, 1990, p. 177). Consciousness-raising for men is loaded with potential problems if done in isolation from women, a problem that can be seen in various parts of the contemporary men’s movement, especially the mythopoetic wing, where a focus on the personal often impedes social analysis and liberatory politics (Jensen, 1995a; Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994). For men, that intersubjective agreement must include women; that is, we have to pay attention to feminist criticism to help us make sense of our experience. This need not require an inflexible commitment to feminist standpoint epistemology. But at the very least, I would argue that women have some sort of epistemic privilege—the idea that “members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are nonmembers of the oppressed group” (Narayan, 1988, p. 35)—that men must honor. My goal in this article is to examine my life and compare it with the narratives of other men, using feminist insights to make sense of it all. This article is an attempt at the “critical story-telling” that Hearn (1987) calls for in the project of “collective self-reflective theorizing” (p. 182). Such work is difficult to do with integrity, but my hope is, following Boone (1990), that

if the male critic can discover a position from which to speak that neither elides the importance of feminism to his work nor ignores

the specificity of his gender, he may also find that his voice no longer exists as an abstraction, but that it in fact inhabits a body: its own sexual/textual body. (p. 12)

Well-articulated defenses of the value and limits of narrative method have been made, such as Stivers's (1992) discussion of "postpositivist" social science. My goal is not to contend that my experience with pornography can be generalized to all men. Instead, I view this as a contribution to an ongoing conversation about pornography. If I examine my body and its pornographic history from a critical stance informed by feminist theory and practice, I can make claims about men, sexism, sexuality, and sexually explicit material, and those claims will be more valuable than the so-called "scientific" research about pornography (Jensen, 1995c). The task is not finding *the* answer but, in Frye's terms (1990, p. 179), perceiving patterns:

The experiences of each woman and of the women collectively generate a new web of meaning. Our process has been one of discovering, recognizing, and creating patterns—patterns within which experience made a new kind of sense, or, in many instances, for the first time made any sense at all. Instead of bringing a phase of inquiry to closure by summing up what is known, as other ways of generalizing do, pattern recognition/construction opens fields of meaning and generates new interpretive possibilities. Instead of drawing conclusions from observations, it generates observations.

As introduction to my story, I need to explain my own journey to this position. My early work on legal aspects of the pornography debate used traditional methods, which allowed me to distance myself from my personal experience with pornography. But a growing sense of dissatisfaction with that work led me to a project designed to confront the content of pornography through an analysis of 20 pornographic paperback novels. I read the books, taking detailed notes about scenes, themes, portrayals, and language used. In the role of detached investigator, I tried to move through the books using my "rational" faculties but found my body getting in the way; I kept getting erections.

Before I started that project, I was aware that pornography still could produce intense sexual reactions in me, even though at that time it had been several years since my last contact with pornography. (I stopped using pornography after returning to graduate school and coming into contact with the feminist critique.) Yet, in

my pursuit of intellectual knowledge, I had detached from the emotional, embodied knowledge of my past experience with pornography; the scholarly endeavor insulated me from those other ways of knowing about pornography. The deeper I got into the academic work, the further I got from that embodied knowledge until, finally, I was forced to confront it through the reaction of my body. As I read the books, intellectually I was able to identify and analyze the misogynistic images and messages. But physically, my body responded the way it had been trained.

That reaction threw into question assumptions that I had been smugly comfortable with. This had, and continues to have, an important effect on my sexuality and my personal life. My concern here, however, is with the equally important effect that experience has had on my scholarly work. I realized that I could no longer deny that part of what I knew about pornography was personal and embodied and that I would have to explore those questions if I wanted to be a competent and ethical researcher. As I planned a project to interview pornography users, I knew I would have to write my own narrative as well as theirs.

## A PERSONAL HISTORY OF PORNOGRAPHY USE

I begin this account with the understanding that my interpretation of my experiences can be challenged. Clearly, I have a kind of access to my emotions and sexual reactions that others do not. But in any person, there can be a host of personal and political roadblocks to a clear understanding of self. My interpretations have changed over time, and what I offer is the best reading I have of them at this time—a reading that others may have grounds to challenge.

The analysis that follows relies heavily on my experience, but is constructed in conjunction with other men's stories, which come from three main sources. First, I have spoken informally with a variety of men as I have worked on this issue and have learned much from those conversations. I also draw on published accounts of men's pornography use cited above. Finally, I have conducted interviews with self-identified pornography users and convicted sex offenders (Jensen, 1995b). Although I refer to those men rarely in this article, my analysis of my pornography use is



heavily influenced by those men who had a variety of experiences with, and opinions about, pornography and its potential harms and benefits.

From those sources, I believe that my use of pornography is fairly typical for a male born after World War II, what I call the post-*Playboy* generation. My exposure to pornography began around 2nd grade. I have hazy memories of a soft-core biker magazine, which included pictures of women naked from the waist up, that a friend had found and hid in his backyard. Viewing the magazine was always a group project; we would pass it around and comment on the women's bodies. After that, someone in my circle of friends almost always had a copy of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, or some similar magazine that had been found, stolen from a store, or taken from dad. One friend had a hiding place in his attic where we occasionally would go to look at them.

By the time I was in junior high, I had found my father's hiding place: *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* were in his dresser, in the second drawer, under the T-shirts on the right. At least one of my two brothers, I found out later, also knew the spot, although we never looked at them together. In my first year of high school, I was a friend of a boy who had perfected the art of getting into movies through exit doors. Usually we went into mainstream films, but when we felt bold we made a run at X-rated movies. I also remember having access to pornographic novels in my high school years and finding them as intense an experience as the visual material.

In college, I saw a few X-rated movies with friends (both all-male and mixed groups) who treated the outings as campy fun and went to a couple of those movies on my own. When I would go with friends from our college in a smaller town to Minneapolis, we often would stop at pornography shops to see what the big city had to offer. In my 20s, my use of pornography was episodic. At various times, I would feel drawn to X-rated movies, and in a 6- or 7-year period, I probably saw 10 to 15 of them, once or twice with someone else, but usually alone. I saw some of these movies at mainstream theaters, but more typically at adult theaters and bookstores, where I would browse among other material. The movies were what is most often called hard-core pornography: graphic sex scenes built around a contrived story line. I typically stayed for no more than 15 to 30 minutes; after the initial excite-

ment wore off, feelings of guilt and shame made it uncomfortable to be in those theaters.

I typically did not purchase pornography to use at home, although through the years, I occasionally bought magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. I never showed pornography to women with whom I was involved, with the exception of one trip to an adult theater with a girlfriend in college. I never made homemade pornography or recorded sexual activity.

Although I did not use pornography in an active way with partners, pornography was central to my sex life at various times. From grade school on, I masturbated to pornographic images, either those on paper in front of me or those retained in my mind from earlier consumption. I focused on certain kinds of images (women performing oral sex on men, men penetrating women anally, group sex involving a woman and more than one man), and I could summon up those images easily.

Although I always found pornography attractive, my heaviest use as an adult came during periods when I was not involved in a relationship with a woman. The last time I remember visiting a pornography shop was about 1987. I returned to graduate school and began my study of the issue in 1988, and since then I have seen pornography only in the context of my academic and political work, and I have kept that viewing to a minimum (the main exception to that is one trip to a gay pornographic movie after coming out). I also have viewed an antipornography slide show, which includes explicit examples, that I have helped present a number of times to school and community groups.

Although this brief summary of my own pornography use leaves out details that are too painful to recount in a public forum, it still was difficult to write. In my anxiety and fear is a lesson about pornography. At the macrolevel, pornography works to create, maintain, and reinforce a system of male control. But for each individual who uses pornography, the story is more complicated and not just an expression of the desire to control women. I continue to feel guilt and shame over my past use of it, even though I realize most men have had similar experiences. Some of the pornography users I interviewed expressed the same feelings. Others expressed no regrets over their use and were proud of what they saw as a transcendence of sexual inhibitions. Although it is difficult to generalize about these emotions, I believe that, like me,



most men who use pornography struggle with the mixed messages from society. On one hand, pornography is widely accepted and can be used for male bonding; in other situations, a man's use of it can be turned against him with the charge that he cannot get a "real woman." Men who were raised in sexually or emotionally repressive families, again like me, may use pornography but then confront those early internalized proscriptions.

Although I have been arguing for the importance of narratives, these differences in men's reactions to their own pornography use highlight how important it is to remember that no single narrative is the whole story. Men's accounts of their own use, including my own, must be weighed against each other, against the accounts of women,<sup>3</sup> and against the ideological content of pornography. Men's use of pornography, and their interpretations of that use, vary greatly. That does not mean that no coherent account of pornography in this society can be constructed. It need not be shown that all men use pornography in exactly the same way for pornography to be a key component of a system of male dominance. In this case, for instance, whether a pornography user feels guilt and shame or is proud of his use, the result is generally the same: The use of pornography continues.

## PORNOGRAPHY AND ME

I focus now on the effects pornography had on me. Based on my experience, I argue that

1. Pornography was an important means of sex education.
2. Pornography constructed women as objects, which encouraged me to see women in real life in that same way.
3. Pornography created or reinforced desires for specific acts, most of which focused on male pleasure and can cause female pain.
4. Rather than unlocking sexual creativity, pornography shaped and constrained my sexual imagination with its standardized scripts.
5. Race was an important aspect of pornography, reinforcing my view of women of color as the "exotic primitive."
6. Viewing a large amount of overtly violent pornography was not necessary for pornography to have the effect of eroticizing violence for me.
7. That eroticization of violence had a tangible effect on my sex life.
8. Pornography is most centrally about control, and I was attracted to it by my need for a sense of control over women and their sexuality.

## SEX EDUCATION

Sex was not openly discussed in my home, and at the time I was growing up, sex education in the schools was limited or nonexistent. So, most of my sexual education came on the streets with peers and was rooted in pornography. It was in that material that I first saw nude adult women and figured out the mechanics of sex.

There is nothing inherently problematic about learning of sexuality from a publication. The problem is when those publications construct sexuality in a male-dominant framework and present women as sexual objects. These images were incredibly powerful for me and my childhood friends. They helped plant in me some basic assumptions about sex: that a certain kind of female appearance was most desirable, that women could be used for sex in ways portrayed in the magazines and movies (as well as through my use of those materials), that women's resistance to certain kinds of sexual activity was the result of prudish inhibitions that could, and should, be overcome. Those messages were transmitted by other cultural products and institutions as well, but it was in pornography that I found them most explicitly expressed.

## OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

Assuming that most people will not contest the assertion that pornography objectifies women, I want to examine in more detail what that means to men. A female friend of mine once told me that one of the things that infuriates her at work is walking into a business meeting and watching men in the room size her up as she moves to her seat. She said she knew that I did it, that her husband did it, that men in general do it. I told her she was right. I do it. Even after several years of study of feminist theory and pornography, I do it. I do not do it as often as I used to, and I catch myself almost immediately. But it happens, even after coming out as a gay man. And sometimes when I realize I am doing it, I choose not to stop, which is a difficult admission to make. It is those times especially that I realize how thoroughly women are constructed as objects in this culture, how powerful that construction is, and how it still has a strong hold on me. Although I believe that the way in which men apprehend women visually is a central part of

the sexual subjugation of women, on the street I always have the option of ignoring my own convictions and using a woman for my own fantasy.

Is this really an act of male supremacy, or simply an appreciation of beauty or an acknowledgment of our sexuality? I do not mean to suggest that sexual attraction is inherently corrupt; to raise these issues is not to advocate a prudish repression of sexuality. But it is crucial to examine the power at work in sexual situations. Heterosexual men's sexuality in this culture is constructed around the domination of women. In some other world, one not tainted by sexism, my concerns perhaps could be minimized. But in a culture that for centuries has defined woman as object, it is essential that men be aware of, and honest about, the way in which we see women.

Again, pornography is not the only element in this construction of women. But my use of pornography was a central component of it. In my case, I have seen women on the street and created sexual scenes with them that were taken directly from pornography I had seen. That has not happened in some time; it is one thing I no longer allow myself. But the fact that it was once a routine part of my sexual imagination tells me something about how pornography has affected my view of women.

Although some commentators have suggested that such objectification is unavoidable, even natural, I believe that resisting it is a fundamental step for men trying to avoid sexist behavior. As Kappeler (1986) wrote:

The fundamental problem at the root of men's behavior in the world, including sexual assault, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, keeping women in the home and in unequal opportunities and conditions, treating them as objects for conquest and protection—the root problem behind the reality of men's relations with women, is the way men see women, is Seeing. (p. 61)

## DESIRE

As the testimony of women has pointed out, men's desire for certain kinds of sexual activity can be taken directly from pornography. There will always be a causation question: Do the desires exist independently and then get represented in pornography, or does pornography help create the desires? One convention of pornography leads me to think that in some ways pornography

can construct desire. Since the mid-1970s, the “money shot” or “cum shot”—showing the man ejaculating onto the woman’s body—has been a standard of explicit pornography to provide visual proof of men’s pleasure (Williams, 1989). As a veteran pornographic movie actor put it, “The cum shot in the face is the stock-in-trade of orgasms. It’s the ejaculation into a woman’s waiting face that gets the audience off more than anything else” (Bill Margold, quoted in Hebditch & Anning, 1988, p. 31).

Some of the men I interviewed said they enjoyed that type of climax, and I can recall similar desires in the past. Consider this comment from a man’s response to a sex survey (Hite, 1982, p. 781):

Nude pictures from men’s magazines turn me on, and when I finally ejaculate, I aim right at the girl’s breasts, pubic hair, or buttocks, whichever pleases me most. The more copious my output of sperm, the more satisfied I am.

Did that desire arise from some “natural” source? From the social construction view of sexuality that I take, the concept of authentic sexual desire is problematic; there is no pure, natural sexuality that is not mediated by culture. Here I simply contend that pornography is a force that can shape desire and that we should be concerned with how men may be conditioned to desire sexual acts that are humiliating, degrading, and painful for women.

## SCRIPTING SEX

Several men I interviewed argued that sexually explicit material helped open up their sexual horizons. For me, pornography constricted, not expanded, my sexual imagination. Looking back on my experiences, I see no evidence that pornography fueled sexual creativity or sparked creative fantasies. Fantasy implies a flight of imagination, a letting go of oneself, the possibility of transcending the ordinary. For me, pornography did none of those things. It constrained my imagination, helped keep me focused on sexual activity that was rooted in male dominance, and hindered me from moving beyond the ordinary misogyny of the culture. Instead of my imagination running wild, my imagination was locked into a film loop, reproducing scripts and scenes from pornography. Pornographic sexuality—as reproduced in pornography and throughout our culture—crippled my erotic imagination, and I have only recently begun the long project of recovering

the erotic, in the expanded sense it is used by Heyward (1989) and Lorde (1984).

A validation of this view comes, ironically, from the actor Margold, who saw no harm in pornography but understood the way it restricts the erotic. In discussing why people need pornographic films, he said: "We're drowning in our own sexual quicksand because there's a lack of imagination" (quoted in Hebditch & Anning, 1988, p. 27).

## RACE

For me, racial differences had erotic potential. Some of the men I interviewed, all of whom were White,<sup>4</sup> said that they did not like pornography that used women of color and that they would fast-forward past it or pass over it in magazines. There was no pattern to these judgments; some men liked Asian women but not Black women, whereas for others the opposite was true. Some men only wanted to watch White women. In the pornography market, there are publications and films that cater to all these tastes.

Those two responses—fascination with or distaste for women of color—are flip sides of the same racist coin. For White consumers, women of color can be even more sexually stimulating. For some, such as me, that connected to the stereotype of the "exotic primitive" and conjured up images of a wild sexuality. So I found pornography that used women of color especially attractive and have specific memories of pornographic magazines that featured Black women and Asian women. That reaction, of course, is hardly progressive. The pornography that highlighted non-White women played on stereotypes of the subservient Asian woman, the hot-blooded Latina, and the sexually promiscuous Black woman. Although I did not consider myself racist at the time, my interest in such material grew out of the racism I had learned (and am continuing to unlearn), just expressed in a manner less overtly racist than those men who told me they found women of color in pornography to be unattractive to them.

## VIOLENCE AND PORNOGRAPHY

I use the terms "violent" and "nonviolent" hesitantly because there is no clear line between the two categories in a misogynist

culture. But in the common use of those terms, violent pornography is usually taken to mean depictions of sexual activity that include overt violence, such as physical abuse, the use of restraints, the presence of weapons, or strong verbal coercion. Non-violent pornography usually describes depictions of sexual activity without those elements. The feminist claim that pornography fuses sex and violence is often rejected by men who say they do not use or enjoy violent pornography. But pornography does not need to be overtly violent to be part of a process by which violence is eroticized. I was never interested in violent pornography, yet I was conditioned by nonviolent pornography to accept violence as erotic. Again, this is one of those claims that is difficult to prove, because we live in a culture that in general sexualizes violence; no one can say for sure what specific images or influences create an appetite for sexualized violence. But pornography plays an important role.

I realized that violence had been eroticized for me when reading the novels previously mentioned. At the time, I would have vigorously denied any claim that I found sexual violence erotic. But as I read those books, I was aroused by descriptions of sexual violence, such as a description of a man's sexual torture of a woman with whips and other paraphernalia. No matter what I thought about sexual violence, the eroticization of violence had taken place in my body; it worked on me. I responded sexually not only to the descriptions of sex, but also to those portions that used explicit violence and coercion. I found myself becoming sexually aroused by material that violated what I thought was my own sense of what was appropriate and healthy sex. I wanted to reject any experience of pleasure from those images, but my body accepted them.

What I had learned to find arousing was a basic power dynamic of male dominance and female subordination,<sup>5</sup> which is much the same in violent and nonviolent pornography. Once male dominance is eroticized, male violence becomes at least potentially erotic. I could have denied that, as I think many men do, but my sexual reaction to the novels uncovered the reality of my erotic imagination. I heard strands of this same story from some of the men I interviewed. For example, one man who was convicted of sexually abusing young girls said that he never sought out violent pornography, but that when he found himself watching such



material by accident, he found it arousing and he "got more into it." He had learned that male dominance was erotic, and so the extension of that dominance to violence was also erotic.

## SEX AND VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD

In defense of pornography, Christensen (1990, p. 41) argued that "the existence of violent sex in no way impugns nonviolent sex or its portrayal." I disagree. When the sex depicted in pornography is conditioned by male dominance, the line between the violent and nonviolent is not nearly as crucial as many would like to believe. The hierarchical structure of nonviolent pornography trained my body to understand the erotic potential that this culture has assigned to rape. During my study of pornography, I learned that rape was sexy to me. That reality had been living in my body for some time, but it was disturbing to have to admit. It led to the inescapable conclusion that I am capable of rape, even if I cannot imagine ever committing such an act. The simple truth is that in this culture, men have to make a conscious decision not to rape, because rape is so readily available to us and so rarely results in sanctions of any kind.<sup>6</sup>

I believe pornography is implicated in—that is, not a direct cause, but a factor in—some men's acts of sexual violence.<sup>7</sup> As I have made clear so far, I do not see myself as exempt from being influenced by images that shape the sexuality of others. So, if that claim about violence I just made is true—that both the sex offenders I interviewed and I learned to eroticize violence—then why have I never committed a sex crime? First, it is not my contention, nor the contention of anyone in the feminist antipornography movement, that pornography alone causes rape or that all pornography users commit rape. A complex network of factors lead a man to rape, and whereas pornography is an important component, it obviously is not the only one.

But it also is important to remember that whereas I say I have never committed a sex crime, all I can really say is that I have not committed a sex crime under the male-defined sexual standards of this culture, which are similar to the standards set out in pornography. My own sexual definitions were framed by my use of pornography, and according to those definitions, I have not

raped. Yet I do not know if that is an opinion that would be shared by every woman I have known (Jensen, 1995a). After trying to examine my sexual history from a nonpornographic perspective, I still come to the conclusion that I never crossed the line into coerced sex. But the final answer to that question would have to come from those women.

## CONTROL

The single most important thing I have learned from analyzing my own history and from the interviews is how central the concept of control—by men over women—is to pornography. In my life, that is most clear from the period in which I used pornography the most heavily. It came in my mid-20s after the break-up of an intense relationship with a woman. One reason I found the relationship so troublesome was that I was not in control. In most of my intimate relationships before and after that one, I retained most of the power to make basic decisions about the nature of the relationship. But in that situation, for a variety of reasons, I gave up control to the woman. That left me in a particularly volatile emotional state after the break-up, which I believe made pornography even more attractive.

In pornography, control remains in male hands in two ways. First, the magazines and movies that I can recall seeing depicted sexual encounters in which men were in control, guiding women's actions to produce male pleasure. The images that stay with me from that period are those in which the woman was completely subordinate, performing sexual acts on and for the man. Second, by making female sexuality a commodity, pornography allowed me to control when and where I used it, and therefore used the women in it. Brummett (1988) made this point in his analysis of pornographic movies viewed on a home VCR, pointing out how the control offered by the text is reinforced by the control offered by the medium (the ability to fast-forward and rewind to play back):

VCRs never say no to their users; neither do characters in pornographic films. People agree to requests for sex with the same instant and uncritical willingness shown by the television and the VCR. (p. 209)

Brummett's point also applies at least partially to other forms of pornography. For me, retreating to a pornographic world allowed me to regain an illusory sense of control over female sexuality that I had lost in real life.

I return now to my reference in the first note to a shift in sexual orientation. This article is about pornography marketed to heterosexual men, and at the time I did the research and the majority of the writing, I lived and identified myself as heterosexual. As I revise this article for publication, I identify myself as a gay man in the process of coming out. Or I may be bisexual. Or I could go back to being heterosexual. Or I may choose to live my life as a celibate gay man (or bisexual, or heterosexual). My point: At this time, I have no need, and no way, to fix my sexual orientation in stone; perhaps I never will. Although this is not the place for an extended discussion of the extent to which sexuality is determined by socialization, biology, or both, certainly my own life is an example of how one's behavior is shaped by social norms and expectations. My use of heterosexual pornography was one way in which I, with the help of a heterosexist culture, made myself heterosexual. No matter what kind of desire I felt for men during that time (and I did at times feel that desire), I "was" heterosexual in a very real sense of the term. This change in my life is relevant, of course, to an autobiographical paper, but I have left a discussion of it until the end because the change does not undermine my analysis of heterosexual pornography.

My increasing openness to my own gayness does provide one important additional insight into my pornography use. From discussions with other men and my own experience, it seems clear that one of the attractions of explicit heterosexual pornography for some men is the presence of naked male bodies and erect penises. Such pornography is one place where men can indulge homoerotic feelings without social sanction; after all, we are there to see the women. Although I would have denied such a motive at the time I was using pornography, I have a clear sense that I was looking at the men in pornography in that way. This homoerotic feeling was no doubt compounded in situations where I viewed the pornography with other men (either in public theaters or private groups) by the knowledge that around me were men with erections.

## CONCLUSION

The feminist antipornography critique has been tagged with a variety of negative and unwarranted labels: prudish, repressive, simplistic, theoretically totalizing, politically naive. I hope this article answers some of those criticisms. My reflections and arguments are not based in prudishness or disgust for sexuality. My goal is not to repress sexuality or deny people's erotic potential. I am not arguing a simplistic pornography-causes-rape position. I do not believe my experiences and perspective can explain all men's use of pornography. And I am fully aware of the practical political problems in implementing the feminist critique through law. Most important, as a man, I am not trying to tell women how to feel about pornography; this article is not an attempt to settle the debate over pornography and sexuality within feminism.

So I do not claim to have proved anything about pornography in any definitive sense. My intention was to argue for an expansion of what counts as knowledge about pornography and to explain how and what I have learned about pornography in those ways. If I have been successful, I have given men an account against which they can compare and explore their own experience with pornography, which may or may not lead them to conclusions similar to mine. And I have offered men and women possible explanations for why men use pornography and assertions about pornography's effects.

When I discuss this kind of work, I often am accused of shaping my account of my experience to fit the antipornography theory I have endorsed. I agree that the theory has affected how I think about, remember, and understand my experience. I also would point out that everyone's account of their experience is shaped by such theoretical commitments. No knowledge is pretheoretical; no one has access to an account of their behavior (or anyone else's behavior) that has not been refracted through ideology. A pornography advocate's account of his experience is shaped by the ideology of sexual and expressive freedom—the idea that any sexual activity is by definition liberating. My work is “tainted” by my commitment to radical feminist ideology, but only to the degree that the work of people who take an opposing view is tainted by their sexual ideology. The question is not whether one

has gone beyond ideology to get at the real truth, but whether one has constructed the account with integrity and offered a compelling interpretation.

In my early work on pornography, when I confined my investigation to more traditional modes of inquiry, I wrote a very different account of pornography's role in the world. I believe that account was incomplete and misleading because of what I concealed, both from myself and others. Our experiences, especially with things as powerful as sexuality and pornography, affect our view of the world; that is one of the fundamental lessons of feminism. Ignoring or repressing those influences does not bracket them out of our research or politics, but simply hides them and impedes our inquiry.

## NOTES

1. The potentially relevant facts about who "I" am include, in no particular order: White, born in 1958, midwestern born and living in the South, raised in the lower middle to middle class and now residing in the middle class, married for 6 years until recent separation, father of a 4-year-old boy, living as a heterosexual most of my life until recent coming out (more on that later), antisexist/profeminist, the third of four children from a typically dysfunctional American family.

2. I did not do this work, of course, in isolation. This article reflects the contributions of a number of friends and teachers, including Nancy Potter, Naomi Scheman, and Donna McNamara—and a special note of appreciation to Jim Koplin. After 7 years of friendship and collaboration, I am not always sure which ideas are mine and which are Jim's. Happily, neither of us worry much about that. I am sure, however, that my life would be far less rich, and my scholarship less valuable, if I did not know him.

3. For such narratives, see *Organizing Against Pornography* (1983). The transcript of the Minneapolis hearings also was published as a book in England (*Pornography and Sexual Violence*, 1988). Also see the report of the Attorney General's Commission on pornography that was published commercially as *McManus* (1986). Excerpts from the testimony before the commission have been published in a book edited by Schlafly (1987). My citation of the "Meese Commission" report, which was rooted in a conservative view of pornography, is not intended as support for its politics.

4. The interview subjects were not all White by design. The work was done in Minneapolis, which is predominantly White, and I received responses to my requests for interviews from White men only.

5. This is not meant to absolve the genre of pornography that casts women as dominant over men. The eroticization of power in that way does not give women real power in the world, and it does nothing to help us in the search for egalitarian models for sexuality that eroticize equality (a goal I realize that not everyone shares).

6. This idea is taken from comments made by Donna McNamara, then the community education director for the Hennepin County Sexual Violence Center, at a college program on pornography that she and I presented.

7. I prefer not to talk about direct causation in such questions of human behavior, but instead rely on narrative accounts of women and men for evidence of the relationship between, in this case, a cultural product and behavior. Some antipornography feminists are more willing to identify pornography as a direct cause, often citing experimental research (Russell, 1988, 1993b).

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