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Pornographic novels and the ideology of male supremacy

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In policy discussions about pornography too little attention is paid to the content of sexually explicit material. The debate tends to concern itself with the concept of pornography without carefully considering the materials that make up the category. This paper is an attempt to provide a detailed description and analysis of the content of one portion of the heterosexual pornography market. This interpretive study of 20 pornographic novels looks for common character types, plots, and themes that run through these fictional narratives, using Dworkin's elements of the pornographic (hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence) as a framework. The study provides support for the feminist critique that contends pornography is one site where female submission and male dominance is endorsed. These novels carry an ideology of male supremacy, eroticized and made sexual.

KEY TERMS: Pornography, feminism, sexual violence, novels.

Too often in policy discussions about the regulation of pornography, too little attention is paid to the content of sexually explicit material. The debate tends to concern itself with the concept of pornography without carefully considering the materials that make up the category. The result is often an abstract debate that ignores the material under discussion. The antidote to that abstraction is a close examination of the content of pornography. This paper attempts to provide a detailed description and analysis of the content of one portion of the heterosexual pornography market.

This interpretive study of 20 pornographic novels looks for common character types, plots, and themes that run through these fictional narratives. The results support the feminist critique that contends that pornography is one site where female submission and male dominance is endorsed. These novels carry an ideology of male supremacy, eroticized and made sexual.¹

Definitions

One point of contention about pornography is definitional. Some people suggest that what is pornographic to one person may not be to another. The

courts have found it difficult to define the legal concept of *obscenity*; the Supreme Court's definition—that which appeals to prurient interest, is patently offensive, and lacks serious value—has done little to clear up the problem (Miller, 1973, 24). Feminist anti-pornography activists have highlighted the difference between *obscenity* and *pornography*, defining the latter as the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women. In contemporary usage, a distinction often is made between *hard-core* and *soft-core* pornography, or between *pornography* and *erotica*.

For purposes of selecting the books for this study, a practical definition was used: *Pornography* is that material which is sold in adult bookstores and marketed to men as pornography. But beyond that, this paper suggests that a sharply drawn definition is not crucial for understanding pornography. This paper focuses not so much on *pornography* as on the *pornographic*. The elements of the *pornographic*, which will be considered in more detail later, include hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence, all in a sexual context. Elements of the *pornographic* are present, to greater and lesser degrees, in a variety of materials, making it more useful to discuss a *pornographic continuum* than to try to define pornography.

In contemporary U.S. society, many mainstream media ads and entertainment programs are on that continuum, along with the movies, magazines, and books that are typically called pornography. The continuum includes fashion ads in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues, R-rated slasher movies, *Playboy*, X-rated adult movies, and snuff films. All have *pornographic* elements; some are more *pornographic* than others. For purposes of legal restrictions, a more exacting definition must be constructed. But for this paper, such a definition is not necessary.

These assertions are not meant to suggest that all sexual material carries the same ideology or works in the same way. In rejecting the need for a specific definition, I am not trying to place all representations of sexual activity in the same category. The analysis in this paper concerns mass-market pornography that has heterosexual themes and is sold primarily to men. Some elements of the analysis could be applied to other genres, and one purpose of this paper is to ask readers to consider that possibility. But each genre, especially lesbian and gay pornography and heterosexual pornography produced by and for women, requires its own analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Various content analyses of pornography have been done, including work on cartoons and pictorials in magazines, and movies (Bogaert, Turkovich, & Hafer, 1993; Brown & Bryant, 1989; Dietz & Sears, 1987–88; Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Matacin & Burger, 1987; Palys, 1986; Prince, 1990; Scott & Cuvelier, 1987; Slade, 1984; Winick, 1985; Yang & Linz, 1990). Most of these studies focused on depictions of violence, and from them no consensus can be reached on trends in contemporary pornography. Some find increasing levels of violence from the 1970s into the 1980s, while others find the opposite. One extensive analysis found that, although pornography's content changed somewhat from 1979 to 1988, the genre still "spotlights the sexual desires and prowess of men" and "consistently and persistently portrays women as sexually willing and available" (Brosius, Weaver, & Staab, 1993: 169).

Less work has been done on *pornographic fiction*. The 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography described the typical adult paperback novel as a

nonstop description of sex aimed primarily at men. Using an admittedly sketchy survey of sex-book publishers, the commission estimated that in 1969 the industry published as many as 70 million and sold up to 30 million of the paperbacks, described as works "which cannot possibly be exceeded in candor, graphic description of sexual activity, or use of 'vulgar' language" (*Technical Report*, 1971, p. 93).

Don Smith (1976) examined adults-only paperback fiction that was readily available in nonpornographic stores from 1968 to 1974. His samples were taken from eight nonmetropolitan communities in five states. Among his findings were (a) the books were typically a series of sex episodes with short transitions of nonsexual material; (b) "the world of pornography is a man's world" (p. 21) with books that contain detailed descriptions of the appearance of women, but not of men (except genital size); (c) men require little inducement to sex, but women often need drugs, alcohol, or pornographic movies; (d) in 9% of the sex acts depicted there are implied or overt expressions of love, of which 3% are mutual and 6% are by the woman and are not returned by the man; (e) a third of the books include some use of force—physical, mental, or blackmail—almost always by the man to encourage an unwanted act; and (f) men dominate the sex, regardless of the setting or participants.

Method and Theory

This examination of the ideology of pornography is based on a qualitative analysis of 20 pornographic paperback novels. With such a small sample, the intent obviously is not to use the techniques of traditional content analysis or to draw broad conclusions about the current pornography market. But what is lost in generalizability by this approach is made up for in the depth of analysis made possible by a close reading of the texts. The traditional content surveys discussed above make it clear that the novels fit the profile of heterosexual mass-market pornography. While these 20 novels cannot be said to be a representative sample in the sense of traditional sampling requirements, they are typical of the genre of pornography being investigated. In short, the goal is not to claim that "all pornography looks like this," but to say that "when pornography looks like this (and lots of it does), these are the implications."

This paper is grounded in a radical feminist critique of pornography and sexuality that focuses on how pornography sexualizes male dominance and female submission. From this view, pornography is understood 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 can promote sexual violence against, women (Cole, 1989; Dworkin, 1981; Itzin, 1992; Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987; Russell, 1993). The feminist critique was written into the anti-pornography civil rights ordinance unsuccessfully pursued in the mid-1980s, which identified pornography as "a practice of sex discrimination" and a "systematic practice of exploitation and subordination based on sex that differentially harms and disadvantages women" (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988, pp. 138–142).

It is important to acknowledge the depth of this critique. It not only critiques the most offensive violent pornography in which women are clearly abused, but asserts that "normal" male sexuality is rooted in male dominance. From this

perspective, cultural products such as pornography work to naturalize that male control, rendering the system of power less visible. Anti-pornography feminists argue that sexuality is one of the central sites in which that male power is exercised and reinforced. The focus is on sexuality's role as a method of control in a patriarchal system in which women are at risk of sexual violence and denied equal access to power and material resources.

Because of the radical nature of the critique, a detailed examination of pornography is crucial. A close reading of these texts unearths the sometimes subtle though often overt ways in which pornography can transmit an ideology of male supremacy that may be invisible to some because of the way in which it is naturalized. The cultural product is taken as an accurate reflection of the system of power that produced it, making it crucial to produce a detailed description of the ideology implicit in it.

The feminist anti-pornography critique has been the subject of extended debate, with both civil libertarians and anti-censorship/pro-pornography feminists raising objections to underlying assumptions and empirical claims (Burstyn, 1985; Christensen, 1990; Downs, 1989; Segal & McIntosh, 1992).² While I will not attempt to answer those critiques directly here, this paper is offered to engage them by providing the kind of empirical evidence often called for.

This paper uses an analysis of pornography offered by Andrea Dworkin (1988), which identifies four key elements of this sexual subordination:

1. Hierarchy: a question of power, with "a group on top (men) and a group on the bottom (women)."
2. Objectification: when "a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, bought and sold."
3. Submission: the acts of obedience and compliance.

In a condition of inferiority and objectification, submission is usually essential for survival. Oppressed groups are known for their abilities to anticipate the orders and desires of those who have power over them, to comply with an obsequiousness that is then used by the dominant group to justify its own dominance.

4. Violence: when it becomes "systematic, endemic enough to be unremarkable and normative, usually taken as an implicit right of the one committing the violence." The first three conditions make violence possible (pp. 266-267).

Dworkin argues that subordination, made sexual in these four ways, is one central component of the oppression of women:

In the subordination of women, inequality itself is sexualized: made into the experience of sexual pleasure, essential to sexual desire. Pornography is the material means of sexualizing inequality; and that is why pornography is a central practice in the subordination of women. (pp. 264-265)

Themes of Pornographic Novels

The books used in this study (see Appendix)³ were purchased in October 1989 and October 1990, from a Minneapolis, MN, news store that carries a

wide variety of publications, including sexually explicit books, magazines and videotapes. I selected the books at random from a large display rack, noting titles only to avoid selecting too many books with similar plots, although titles of books of this kind may have nothing to do with story lines. The sexual activity in the books is predominantly heterosexual,⁴ and, while there is little empirical work on the gender of pornography consumers, my own experience leads me to believe that these books are purchased mostly by men.⁵

First, a few general observations about the books: In these novels almost every character, even those who appear for a short time, becomes involved in sex, and the portrayals of sexuality fit into gendered categories. Men are portrayed as always sexually hungry, eager and willing to engage in sex without hesitation. Only young boys may hesitate, usually only for the brief moment needed for them to get over the shock of being seduced by an older woman.

Depictions of women in the books are slightly more varied. There are several standard portrayals: (a) the "hot bitches," either adult or teenage women who are similar to men in their constant desire for sex, some of whom are portrayed as nymphomaniacs in a clinical sense; (b) the "hesitant prudes," adult women who resist sex at first but quickly are overcome by lust and develop voracious sexual appetites; and (c) the "uninitiated youths," who fear sex because of a lack of knowledge but become willing participants in sexual activity once their fears are overcome. No female characters reject sex from any man, and the men view all women as being available for sex, unless another man has a stronger claim to a particular woman. The only difference between female characters is the amount of time it takes them to realize this hypersexuality and become willing participants.

What is the purpose of a woman in these novels? The key element is not that the female characters are always portrayed sexually; obviously male characters are as well. But these books suggest that for women there is no other defining characteristic. As one woman, a "hot bitch," tells a teenager: "Whenever you aren't stuffed full of prick, you'll feel vacant. Hollow. You'll feel unfulfilled" (*Spreading It Around*, p. 72). Another woman, a doctor, overcomes her reluctance to being forced to have sex, learning that in intercourse, "All she felt was a completion of her body as a woman, a fulfillment of her soul as a human being" (*The Lady Plays Doctor*, p. 23). Later, she tells the doctor who employs her, "Come on and fuck me some more, dammit. I was made for it. Doctoring is just a sideline with me" (p. 139).

The pornographic novel constantly reminds the reader that, in the end, all women are the same in that all women are for sex. How is this hypersexuality of women portrayed? It is useful to turn to Dworkin's elements of subordination.

Hierarchy

The power imbalance in these pornographic novels is overwhelming, both in the ways in which characters are situated in the stories and in the descriptions of sexual activity. Men typically hold the positions of power, as the executives, employers, supervisors, or doctors. The secretaries, students, and nurses—popular occupations for women in the books—are portrayed as being routinely sexually available to men. In one book, a nurse is approached for sex by two

interns: "She hated it. Nevertheless, she knew that she was in no position to complain" (*Nurse's Secret Lust*, p. 87).

But men do not need that formal authority to be able to dictate the terms of sexual contact. When a female teacher tries to resist a fellow teacher's offer, he tells her, "Look, I want to ball with you. And if you don't like it that's tough" (*Teacher's Passionate Urge*, p. 44). Often the man and woman engaging in sex are not described in terms of occupation or authority, but the power relationship is clear. In one such case involving a male car mechanic and a female customer, the man orders the woman into a sexual position, telling her, "You just remember one thing. You're gonna have to listen to me at every step. I'm the one who's calling the shots. You got me?" (*Everybody's Virgin*, p. 141). Men often gain extra satisfaction from exercising that power: "He liked seeing her squirm. It gave him a feeling of power forcing her to suck his cock when he knew she hated every second of it" (*Easy Office Girl*, p. 17). Women in the books do not attempt to make such demands, nor are they described as gaining pleasure from control.

When women do appear in positions of authority, usually they are not allowed to exercise their power; sometimes they willingly give it up. For example, male students routinely take charge over female teachers. In one book, a female teacher tries to reject a student's demand for anal sex. "'Maybe,' he laughed, 'I don't give a damn. I want to get my rocks off, Teach. I'm gonna do it the way I want to. Understand?'" (*Teacher's Passionate Urge*, p. 80). Even successful, assertive women who have achieved widespread fame will cast off any power that fame brings when a man approaches them for sex. A cabbie is at first nervous when he picks up a movie star. After they begin having sex, however, he relaxes. "Famous as she might be, she was just like any other woman when it came to loving. She wanted to be dominated by me" (*Taxi Tramps*, p. 154).

Occasionally, a woman will be portrayed as having power that can rival a man's. In *Power Trip*, the main female character's status comes from a large inheritance, something she merely received and did not create. With that power she is able to control a private detective who is working for her but who dislikes taking orders from her. Eventually they fall in love (that is, what passes for love in these books, an extension of sexual desire) and marry, and the power dynamic changes as the man takes charge sexually. As he begins to have sex with her, he thinks to himself, "Total master of the situation, this was the first time he was feeling good since he had taken on [the woman as a client]" (*Power Trip*, p. 139). The message is not only that through sex a man assumes his natural dominant position, but that such dominance is the way to contentment for a man.

In general, the power that men hold in these books comes either from their position in society or simply from their being men. Any power that women hold is almost always derived from their bodies, their ability to perform sexually—power that in the end is controlled by men. For example, in *Easy Office Girl*, an ambitious woman rises to the top job at a television station by having sex with men and then manipulating them. Her success is the result not of talent or hard work, but of sex.

Challenges to the male-dominant hierarchy are resolved quickly. In one book a man tells the woman that he wants her to get on her knees and that he doesn't know why he likes that position. She tells him:

"Cause you are a male chauvinist pig," she exclaimed.

"Honey, you've been liberated," he told her. "You'd better get on your knees fast and tell me you're sorry for talking to a man like that."

For a second Susan wanted to slap his face. But she thought better of it. Reluctantly she dropped to her knees.

"I apologize," she said as the man moved closer. (*Secretary's Naked Lunch*, p. 77)

Objectification

In contemporary American media—indeed, throughout society—women are routinely presented as objects for the visual or sexual consumption of men; that pornographic novels are no different is hardly surprising. The argument is often made, however, that pornography objectifies men as well, presenting them as sexual objects. While pornography does present men as hypersexual beings, it does not present them as objects. Men in these novels are the sexual subjects, the beings with agency who control and direct the sexual activity. As Catharine MacKinnon (1989) reminds us, it is helpful to remember the dominant grammar of sex and pornography in our culture: "Man fucks woman; subject verb object" (p. 124).

One manifestation of this grammar is the difference in the way in which male and female bodies are described. The physical descriptions of men are limited to a few words about the penis, which is invariably described as unusually large. There is almost no discussion of other male physical characteristics. But much attention is paid to describing the appearance of women, with special notice taken of the mouth, breasts, legs, and buttocks. Often, women are reduced to their genitalia: They don't just have a vagina, they are a vagina. When teased by a male partner who is withholding sex, one woman cries out, "Yes, yes, whatever you say. I'm a cunt" (*Gal About Town*, p. 123). In another example, an attorney demands sex from a woman, saying, "You owe me your cunt . . . and I'm going to collect" (*Power Trip*, p. 75).

Men in the novels have penises, but the men are never referred to as being a penis. The typical attitude toward the penis is one of reverence, of respect for its power. One man is described as "reveling in the wonderful sensation of his magnificent power as the great, rampaging cock continued to fill and refill her" (*Power Trip*, p. 80). In fact, the penis is treated almost as a religious symbol. In another book, a male student approaches the teacher after class and says, "Why don't you get down on your knees and worship it?" (*Teacher's Passionate Urge*, p. 60).

In several instances in the novels, women embrace their own objectification by using and taking pleasure in pornography. In one novel, an older woman encourages the boy she is seducing to show her pornographic magazines, and they try to re-enact sexual positions from them:

Molly laid the photo close to them so they could go on studying it. She arranged herself just like the lusty blonde, on her elbows and knees, with her cute little ass sticking out. (*Balling, Sucking Widow*, p. 85)

In another book, a female doctor who has been coerced into sexual activity by her boss finds herself being blackmailed with photos taken during the coerced

sex. But the woman finds herself enjoying the photos, the record of her sexual enslavement: "Those photographs were their weapon over her, and they were also a source of joy to Joyce" (*The Lady Plays Doctor*, p. 147). As we shall see in the next two sections, this tactic of making women a party to their own subordination is central to the ideology of pornography.

Submission

Occasionally in these novels, men must rely on physical force to ensure women's submission. But an integral part of women's sexual submission in pornography, as Dworkin points out, is their willingness to comply with any request. This essential element generally takes one of two forms. In some cases the woman is aware of her submissive nature and seeks the degrading sex. These women come to the scenes ready for whatever the men want. For example, one woman considers leaving a husband who beats her and forces her to engage in strange sex. But, she concludes, "What's the use in kidding myself, Doctor? I love it as much as he loves punishing me, eh? Well, so be it!" (*Wives Who Will*, p. 125).

A more common scenario in pornographic novels involves women who are initially hesitant. The woman does not at first understand her need to submit and learns along the way to crave sex and domination. The man's job is to force the sex on the woman until she realizes her proper role, a theme that will be discussed in the following section. This is perhaps the most pervasive theme in pornography; every book I analyzed included such descriptions of initial fear, revulsion or anger on the part of women facing sexual situations. But the women quickly develop an unquenchable thirst for sex, often in ways that are painful or degrading. In its simplest form, the exchange works like this:

"Ohhhh, don't fuck me. You can't fuck me!"

[Man]: "You want it so bad, you don't even know what you're saying."

"I don't want it. I don't . . ."

...

"Fuck me! Ohhh, damn you, fuck me now!" (*What A Librarian!*, pp. 60–61)

Once converted, the woman is concerned with little but sex. In one book, a woman explains that although the man did not treat her with respect, she didn't mind. "He could degrade her any way he chose to, just as long as he didn't take that lovely hard meat out of her mouth" (*The Lady Plays Doctor*, pp. 63–64).

Sometimes the women remain ambivalent even after they have been "broken in," but that ambivalence always melts away. In a scene where an employee is forced to perform for her boss, the following thoughts go through her mind:

She hated herself. She hated sucking on his prick. She discovered she hated herself worst of all—for enjoying this degradation. . . . This humiliating scene was sexually arousing her. . . . If she didn't get it, she would surely go crazy with lust. (*Easy Office Girl*, p. 16)

Women also are sometimes portrayed as wanting to submit to sex but pretending not to. In one book a woman is set free to enjoy sex after the man puts her dress over her head, concealing her reactions: "Now she would not be betrayed. Now

she could be fucked and sucked without showing him how much she wanted to be fucked and sucked. Typical woman" (*The Town Sluts*, p. 93).

In all the books, any reservations that women have are eventually resolved, and they become willing sex partners, no matter how traumatic their past experiences may have been. For example, one book attributes an adult woman's resistance to sex to her ambivalent feelings over being sexually abused as a child. But after finally giving in to her "natural" desire, she realizes:

God, what a fool she had been! What an insane fool! Just because several men used her the way a female should be used, she had spent most of her life without cock, wonderful cock. (*Boy-Hungry Librarian*, p. 148).

This is one of the many instances in which the novels portray sexual submission as natural for young girls. In one book a woman describes being picked up after school by a man when she was 12:

And I might have been only twelve years old but I was willing to give him that blow-job too. Maybe that's why sexually I'm such a good wife today, Doctor, because I had a lot of heavy sex when I was younger. I was just never afraid of it, you know what I mean?" (*Wives Who Will*, p. 42)

Incest between girls and stepfathers, fathers, or brothers is also portrayed sympathetically, usually with the girl as a willing participant.

Violence

The need for women to be shown their natural submissive role often is connected to the violence in pornography. This takes the form of everything from the use of mild force—"Candy was about to protest, but Daryl pulled her platinum blonde hair and shoved his cock into her wet mouth" (*Candy's Sweet Mouth*, p. 10)—to bondage, rape, and torture.

The language used to describe sex and the male organ is larded with violent images. The penis is consistently referred to as a type of weapon: "He continued sliding into her as he got off his gun" (*Secretary's Naked Lunch*, p. 159). This collection of descriptions is from *Everybody's Virgin*:

cock stabs (p. 19); his rifle-like penis (p. 20); his stirring, dagger-like rod (p. 27); his razor-sharp organ (p. 41); his jackhammer cock (p. 104); his steady spear (p. 105); my lover's quick, surging stabs (p. 142); his hurling dagger kept on slashing up between my buns (p. 157); I really want to slice with my cock (p. 170); just jackknife your prick inside me. Just stab it real nice. (p. 176)

But beyond these uses of violent imagery are numerous descriptions of overtly violent acts committed by men against women. From the perspective of male characters in the novels, violence is an acceptable method of ensuring sexual cooperation from women. For example, in one book a woman refuses to participate in sadomasochistic sex, so the man whips her until she submits. The man then tells a friend, "Women, women . . . they won't do what you want them to unless you use a little pressure" (*Teacher's Passionate Urge*, p. 101).

For men in these novels, the violence is also a source of pleasure once the woman's participation has been secured:

He slapped at her thighs several times, which caused Ray to feel an even greater measure of excitement as he kept on spiritedly thrusting his dick deep inside her pussy. . . . This time Ray asserted himself even more vigorously than before. He kept reaching out with his trembling hands, slapping at his lover's buttocks, enjoying the activity as he moved that much closer to climax. (*The Hungry Hostess*, pp. 33–34)

Although it is always the men who commit the violent acts, violence and pain are typically described from the woman's point of view and come in two different forms. Some women who have eagerly agreed to sex find themselves enjoying pain that occurs in the course of sexual activity. In these cases, the violent act and resulting pain are not connected to coercion into the sex act. The second, and more common, description of violence and pain follows a standard rape-fantasy scenario, in which the woman initially resists sexual contact but eventually gives in to overwhelming pleasure. This scenario begins with some level of force to overcome the woman's resistance and includes her varying levels of pain, which is described as adding to her pleasure.

In the 20 novels analyzed, 16 used the rape-fantasy scenario at least once, and most repeated it throughout the book. In four novels, the women were portrayed as nymphomaniacs who did not need to be coerced into sexual activity. The following examples show the different levels at which the portrayal of women enjoying this fusion of sex, pain, and violence are played out in the novels:

His fingers cruelly cut into her soft flesh. . . . Oddly this stimulated her to a fever pitch that she had missed. The pain in her rear end made the pleasure he was giving her asshole all the more apparent. . . . The pain actually heightened her senses, made her more aware of what was happening to her. (*Easy Office Girl*, p. 127)

As Susan felt the thick, long, slippery penis gliding up her asshole, she let out a small moan of pain. This pleases Larry. Having a streak of sadism in him added to his erotic pleasure. "Fuck my asshole," she told him. "Go ahead. I like it when it hurts, Larry." (*Secretary's Naked Lunch*, p. 136)

[After a woman's father-in-law catches her masturbating and hits her on her buttocks with his belt]: I was quite startled by the notion that he could beat me in one instant and make love to me in the next. My naked pink flesh shook with anticipation. . . . And soon my juices began to flow so plentifully that I could no longer deny how much I loved him even though he had only moments before strapped my buttocks. I gave way. (*Wives Who Will*, pp. 33–34).

[A woman is tied up by several men for a gang rape]: Sheila whimpered pitifully and tugged furiously at the ropes. She was no longer angry at Neil and Robbie. She merely wanted to free herself in order to play with the young man's prick and balls. (*Sheila Spreads Wide*, p. 65).

She did not struggle. She had realized some time ago that she was having the time of her life. She merely wanted the men to get on with the gangbang. (p. 77)

In one book, rape is described as pleasurable for women, "one of those things in life that are disgusting when thought about, but downright fun when tried" (*Town Shuts*, p. 142). After the rape, Ramona berates the rapist for not satisfying her: "Hey! You can't leave me hanging! Christ, I'm hotter than hell! Come on, I wanta suck your cock!" (pp. 142-143). Later, in a typically absurd plot turn, Ramona meets a boxing trainer who is angry because women are diverting his fighter from training. This man spontaneously hits her with a tree branch, sparking Ramona to cry out, "OH! THAT'S IT! BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF ME! HURT ME!" (p. 151). The trainer—whose visit to a prostitute is described earlier in the book—continues to beat her, hurt her, and finally kill her. The male violence here takes on an aspect of retribution; men take sex from women, who are blamed for seducing men. The fitting punishment is death.

The Ideology of Male Supremacy

The ideology of male supremacy appears throughout the nonstop descriptions of sexual activity in pornographic novels, incorporating some or all of Dworkin's categories of sexual subordination. A final excerpt from one book shows how these elements can come together to present a picture of women as naturally powerless sexual objects who crave violence and sex at the direction of a man.

In the concluding chapter of *Easy Office Girl* (pp. 147-158), the woman who has used her sexual power over men to rise to the top at a television station approaches the station owner to ask for the top management job. After owner Ed Morgan agrees to give Cheryl (who is never given a last name) the job, he takes her into a sadomasochism chamber. She asks to leave, but he cuts off her clothes and hits her with a paddle. Her resistance and fear of pain evaporate quickly:

Soon, the pain subsided and she found herself actually enjoying the scene. It was kinky. She couldn't explain why it was turning her on so. But it was. The pain had heightened her senses. She found herself totally alive now. But when was he going to get down and really fuck her?

Morgan then begins a torture session that includes Cheryl being bound, gagged, and whipped. He urinates on her and gives her a chemical enema. Cheryl reacts in standard pornographic fashion:

All she had gone through had turned her on! She had needed to be used, abused! He was such a forceful man, not like the namby-pamby men she had found before. He couldn't be pushed around. She couldn't use sex as a weapon against him.

He knew what he wanted—and took it. . . .

He knew women.

He knew what turned them on. . . . He could humiliate her and make her love every second of it.

She was humiliated, degraded, made to feel less than human.

He was using her.

Just like she had used all the other men to get to this point.

And the hell of it was, she enjoyed it!

She needed to be abused, to be humiliated. The pain heightened her senses all the way to where she could enjoy the pleasure. It gave her a good contrast of how good the pleasure actually was in comparison.

Most of all, she needed a man who was a man. Not the sniveling turds who could be wrapped around her little finger.

But when Morgan showed her that a man could make her do whatever he wanted, she found her true self. She needed to be used by this man in whatever fashion his mind could conjure up. It was necessary for her.

This was a man she could worship.

... [T]hen he used her again. All night long.

And she loved him for it.

Conclusion

This analysis is not meant as the final word on the content of pornography, or even of pornographic novels, but as part of an ongoing conversation about content and meaning. It also is intended to be read in connection with narrative accounts of women and men about how pornography has affected their lives, a project I have undertaken elsewhere (Jensen, 1992). Like all texts, of course, pornography does not offer a single meaning that will be decoded in the same fashion by all. As Stephen Prince (1990) puts it, "To talk about *the* ideology of pornography, then, is to assume that pornography is one thing and plays one role" (p. 39).

Still, if my reading of these books is not completely idiosyncratic, the consistent use of misogynistic themes indicates that there is *an* ideology that pornography can easily tap into. Whether it is possible, in a culture structured by male dominance, to create pornography that does not tap into this ideology is a more contentious question I will not address here. But while there are limits on my analysis, some conclusions can be drawn.

No matter what the behavioral effects of this material, it is important to consider the implications of the very existence of misogynist pornography. Pornographers understand that sexual material infused with woman-hating sells well. Woman-hating, we might conclude, lives in the hearts of many men. The books I analyzed, then, are in some sense an indication of the resiliency of sexism in contemporary America. This may seem a trivial statement; that American society is sexist is hardly a controversial claim. But what is important is the degree and the depth of sexism, the ways in which misogyny manifests itself and what those manifestations say about our collective character.

Pornography supporters often respond to this kind of analysis by pointing out that pornography misrepresents male sexuality as well as female sexuality. But I have shown several ways in which male sexuality is portrayed as different from female sexuality: Men are in positions of power in the world and in sexual situations, they are sexual subjects while women are portrayed as objects, and they commit violence against women. While the portrayals of both male and female sexuality are exaggerated, there are important differences.

Just as important as those differences in the novels are the different social positions of men and women in the world. Men as a class (though not always individually) hold power not only in the novels but also in the world. Although men can be the victims of violence by women, typically it is men who sexually harass and women who are harassed, men who batter and women who are battered, men who rape and women who are raped. I agree that pornography is detrimental to the sexual development of men; as Harry Brod (1988) put it, pornography is as alienating for male sexuality as for female. The difference, as Brod also pointed out, is that women also face the constant threat of male violence. Stated more bluntly by Jane Caputi and Diana E. H. Russell (1990): Ask men why they feel threatened by women and they will say they are afraid of being laughed at; ask women why they feel threatened by men and they say they are afraid of being killed (p. 34).

There is much talk in the 1990s of a "postfeminist" age, and women have made some gains on economic, political, and cultural fronts. But this should not obscure the power of patriarchy and the enduring ways in which women live as an oppressed class in the United States. In Faludi's (1991) terms, women are still fighting an "undeclared war" and losing ground in a period of backlash. Wolf (1991) has described how that war can be masked by a pretty face, while French (1992) has chronicled its more devastating impact. The lesson is that while *some* of the more overt manifestations of sexism have been eliminated by small legal and social gains, the lived reality of many women is still limited by subordinate status and vulnerability to violence.

The progress made through this kind of interpretive study is, as Clifford Geertz (1973) writes, "marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other" (p. 29). In the debate over pornography we too often have vexed each other without much precision. This paper offers one step toward greater precision.

Again, I am not suggesting that one small study such as this proves that the feminist critique can be applied to all genres of pornography in contemporary U.S. culture. The precision I seek must be earned in small steps and detailed analyses. Further research, obviously, is necessary on all aspects of the pornography industry: production, content, and effects. That research needs to cover both lesbian and gay pornography as well as heterosexual material. It should investigate differences between pornography produced by and for men, and that made by and for women. My own preference is for thick description, detailed interpretive analysis, and narrative accounts over traditional survey, content, and experimental research. All of these endeavors, however, can contribute to a deeper and more complete understanding of how pornography is made, what it is, and how it is used. From that can come more informed and, I hope, effective policy decisions.

Appendix

Novels analyzed

- Balling, sucking widow.* (1985). By Nick Eastwood. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 152 pp.
- Boy-hungry librarian.* (1978). By Randy Howard. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 150 pp.
- Candy's sweet mouth.* (1990). By R. K. Kopp. 1974. Reprint, Sun Valley, CA: American Art Enterprises. 159 pp.
- Easy office girl.* (1976). By Robert Vickers. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 158 pp.
- Everybody's virgin.* (1989). By Debbie Ray. 1977. Reprint, North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 191 pp.
- Gal about town.* (1981). By Jack O'Latern. Published in one volume with *Spreading it around*. New York: Carlyle Communications. 180 pp.
- The hungry hostess.* (1989). By Marsha Mead. 1975. Reprint, North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 192 pp.
- The lady plays doctor.* (1975). By Jerry Milner. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 155 pp.
- Nurse's secret lust.* (1989). By John Crowley. 1977. Reprint, North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 192 pp.
- Power trip.* (1989). By Rod Strong. North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 154 pp.
- Secretary in heat.* (1976). By Ray Manning. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 158 pp.
- Secretary's naked lunch.* (1989). By Tanya Mazuk. 1976. Reprint, North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 190 pp.
- She blew her oral exam.* (1986). By Tom Allison. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 148 pp.
- Sheila spreads wide.* (1976). By David Brown. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 158 pp.
- Spreading it around.* (1981). By Bea Linder. Published in one volume with *Gal about town*. New York: Carlyle Communications. 163 pp.
- Taxi tramps.* (1975). By Chris Harrison. New York: Midwood Publications. 187 pp.
- Teacher's passionate urge.* (1989). By Carol Davis. North Hollywood: American Art Enterprises. 191 pp.
- The town sluts.* (1976). By J. H. Long. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 158 pp.
- What a librarian!* (1986). By John Kellerman. San Diego: Greenleaf Classics. 153 pp.
- Wives who will.* (1990). By Roger Crowell. 1976. Reprint, Sun Valley, CA: American Art Enterprises. 160 pp.

Notes

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1. This paper includes excerpts from pornographic novels, some of which depict sex in a graphic and violent manner. I do this with regret, realizing that by reproducing these passages I add to the amount of pornography available in the world; once this paper is published, I have no control over who uses these excerpts. In consultation with activists in the anti-pornography movement, I have made a decision about balancing the potential harm in reproducing pornography with the need for concrete examples to support the analysis. I do not take that decision lightly, nor would I suggest it is not open to criticism.

2. One of the criticisms of the feminist anti-pornography position, for example, is that because experimental research has not clearly established a link between pornography and sexual violence, the feminist critique is unproven. However, narrative accounts have documented the harms argued in the feminist critique (*Public hearings*, 1983). When such accounts are combined with existing social science research, a strong case can be made for such links. (Russell, 1988). In that case, the debate is over basic epistemological questions as much as political ones.

3. Because titles of pornographic books have particular importance, the novels quoted in this paper are cited and separately listed in the Appendix by title.

4. In the 20 books I read, only two scenes involved male homosexual sex. There are lesbian scenes in all of these books, but it would be hard to describe these as portrayals of any kind of authentic lesbian sexuality. Sex between women in these books typically serves (a) to loosen up frigid women; (b) to entertain male characters; or (c) as a substitute when men are not available. The one book that included a scene with what appeared to be "real" lesbians (*Taxi Tramps*) portrayed them and their sexual activity as repulsive to the male narrator.

5. Pornographic novels aimed specifically at a homosexual audience were not included in this study. Much of what is said possibly could apply to some gay and lesbian material, but I can only speculate.

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