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Porn Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20

# Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field

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Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Linda Williams (2014) Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field, Porn Studies, 1:1-2, 24-40, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2013.863662

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.863662

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*Porn Studies,* 2014
Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, 24–40, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.863662

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field

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(*Received 15 August 2013; accepted 24 October 2013*)

This article provides an overview of the state of 'pornography, porno, porn' studies grounded on a critique of my own anthology and other significant texts. It notes the (over)abundance of work on gay pornography versus the surprising paucity on heterosexual pornographies; the under-representation of soft core; the near non-existence of an 'archive'; and the need for more original single-authored books. Finally, the article makes a plea that criticizes the very title of this journal in the casual, too-comfortable use of the terms 'porno' and now 'porn' that risk aligning the academic field too closely with the industry, thus eliding critical distance and suggesting that the field is automatically 'pro-porn,' which it should not be.

**Keywords:** pornography; archive; hard core; soft core; obscenity

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## The field

Academic fields are gardens that need to be tended. Sometimes they grow and flourish, sometimes they get choked with weeds. For the last 15 years many of us tilling the soil of the field of pornography studies have hoped that it might one day receive the same kind of respect and legitimacy that other new fields such as television studies or new media have recently earned. In this essay I ask about the state of this field. I make this assessment on the occasion of the inaugural publication of the first academic journal ever devoted to this topic, and over which there has been a considerable amount of controversy.[1] I will undertake this assessment by beginning with the story of my own relation to the formation of what is clearly now a burgeoning, but to my mind not always well-tended, field. I will then extrapolate from my own story to wider concerns.

In 1989 I published a single-authored book about pornography: *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. It was hardly the first book on the topic, but it was probably the first academic, feminist book to be interested in the form and history, the power and pleasure, of moving-image pornography from the perspective of film theory and criticism. In writing it, I had no intention of helping to spawn a field. I simply wanted to understand more about these troubling, fascinating, and provoking films, which at that time were turning into the more ubiquitous videos that brought moving-image pornography into the home. To what extent could I understand these pornographies as part of our popular culture and as genres like other film genres? What was their address to us as spectators? What was

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their history? I also wanted to avoid entanglement in the still-raging debates about the supposed harm or value of pornography. Because it existed and was then taking on new forms with home video, it needed to be studied critically.

In 1989 the idea of seeking a place for what would come to be called porn studies in the academy seemed unthinkable. However, 10 years later, after publishing an updated second edition, and seeing a growing field that might amount to more than an artifact of the porn wars of the 1980s, the idea seemed more feasible. For my own interests, the methodology consisted of an application of the already existing field of film and video studies along with various forms of gender and sexuality studies. For others it might be a subfield of history, art history, anthropology, cultural studies, or the then developing queer studies. By 2004, when I edited a volume of essays entitled *Porn Studies*, I was convinced that such a field was not only possible, but inevitable (Williams 2004). Indeed, my very blunt and over-familiar title (discussed below) might have seemed to signal that such a field had already arrived. Yes, it *was* possible, I argued in its introduction, to put aside the 'tired debates' between pro-censorship, anti-pornography feminism and anti-censorship, 'sex positive' feminism. The field that was mapped by my anthology, and also by an earlier wide-ranging anthology called *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment* (Elias et al. 1999) and later by Peter Lehman's (2006) anthology *Pornography, Film and Culture*, was wide and varied. Unlike some of the earlier feminist anthologies on both sides of the pornography controversy, these three books put aside most of these debates and dug into the field.

Primarily using my own anthology, as well as some subsequent publications, as an example of some typical directions of the field, I want to ask what has flourished and what has weeded over? I begin with my own anthology because I know it best and remember what I hoped it could be (as well as its inevitable compromises). The anthology was intentionally long (496 pages) so as to impress with the sheer volume of approaches to as many varieties of pornography as possible —print, manga, pin-up, film, video, *avant-garde* and more ordinary generic pornography of the hetero-sexual, gay and lesbian varieties. It was also richly illustrated even though it had to be printed abroad at some extra cost due to objections from Duke's usual printer. It seemed to me crucial that images be as abundant and illustrative as they would be in any art history or film book.

The first section attempted to introduce the variety of the field. In *Hard Core* I had limited my study to heterosexual hard-core films and videos. Here, I made a move that is now familiar in many anthologies: to encompass a wide range of different pornographies, beginning with the language of *The Starr Report* on then-President Clinton's sexual relations with an intern (Maria St. John), continuing with the private home video of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee that had 'gone viral' on the internet long before such a term even existed (Minette Hillyer), hard-core Japanese pornographic comics marketed to women (Deborah Shamoon) and an analysis of amateur online pornography sites (Zabet Patterson). All of these essays began as seminar papers in two different graduate seminars on pornography that I taught during the early 2000s. Even though my goal had been to reach for varieties of pornography, I am struck today by how few of these studies (indeed throughout the entire anthology) aimed at the mainstream commercial hard core that I had privileged in my own work. This is a tendency worth noting. I had always expected that someone might follow the route I had taken through the mainstream, but no

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one did. Heterosexual pornographies, although far and away the most numerous, were not popular objects of study in this period of the flourishing of queer studies. If this section succeeded in introducing the variety of pornographies available, it perhaps was guilty of ignoring what still remained the mainstream of hard-core heterosexual video pornography, thus skewing the impression of what pornography was in its most dominant form. This is a trend that seems to have continued. Very few published works have tackled the dominant mainstream of moving image pornography and I cannot but think that this avoidance of the heterosexual mainstream, especially of its history, has left a large central plot of the garden untended.

Part Two, 'Gay, Lesbian and Homosocial Pornographies,' was an attempt to map the boundaries of non-heterosexual pornographies (Williams 2004). It included an essay by Thomas Waugh on the homosocial reception conditions of the 'classical' American stag film, an essay on the culture and aesthetics of all-male moving image pornography focused on a key 1977 film (Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo), a pioneering essay on the emergence of lesbian pornography from 1968 to 2000 (Heather Butler), plus a queer reading of a work of straight pornography by a gay director (Jake Gerli). The first and last essays foregrounded the importance of the possible queer context for the reception of ostensibly 'straight' pornographies.

Of all the subfields of the academic study of pornography, this queer and 'queering' approach has perhaps flourished the most, although this is much more true for the male side of queer pornography than the female side. Even if there are lively pockets of lesbian pornography produced in places such as Denmark and the San Francisco Bay Area, there is not an equally thriving academic field of lesbian pornography studies; and no wonder, given the miniscule production of actual lesbian pornography compared with the many all-male varieties. Certainly there has been no equivalent to the ground-breaking articles on gay male pornographies by Richard Dyer, or of Thomas Waugh's (1996) *Hard to Imagine* – a grand history of gay male eroticism in photography and film before Stonewall – or of the affecting memoir *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* of Samuel R. Delany (1999), or of José Capino's (2005) appreciation of the auteur status of Wakefield Poole, or John Champagne's (1995) study of the social–cultural context of the reception of gay and straight pornography in *The Ethics of Marginality*. The gay male (or simply all-male) side of pornography studies has carved out a thriving subfield of history, ethnography, queer and film and media studies, while studies of much less numerous lesbian pornographies, perhaps still suffering from the legacy of those 'off our backs,' 'on our backs' debates, has not similarly flourished.[2]

Two recently published books show the range of diverse and passionate investment in the gay male pornographic field. Jeffrey Escoffier's (2009) *Bigger than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* is an authoritative account of the rise of gay pornography since the 1970s – the studios, the stars, the auteurs. Written by an enthusiastic and knowledgeable fan, this book is a model of the genre of popular writing about pornography. Also published that year, and proof that this subfield can accommodate a wide range of approaches, is Tim Dean's (2009) *Unlimited Intimacy*, about the subculture of barebacking. This book offers a more scholarly, theoretical contrast to Escoffier's fan history, although in its own way it too is the work of a fan. While Dean's book sometimes tends to read pornography as if it alone could offer the authentic ethnography of a subculture, it is nevertheless a stunningly original contribution from a mostly sociological

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perspective. One of the most interesting ideas in this book is that the most long-standing trope of visible male pleasure – the ubiquitous convention of the money shot that holds sway in most heterosexual and gay pornography – no longer proves necessary in a subgenre whose transgressive fantasy is the invisible 'breeding' of virus, which could not occur with the usual external ejaculation. Dean's central thesis is that bareback pornography 'constitutes a mode of thinking about bodily limits, about intimacy, about power' and that it is also a 'valid way of thinking about a virus.' It may or may not be valid, but the book offers a provocative contribution to a growing field studying gay pornography that can be expected to flourish because the scholars who write about these pornographies have found them crucial to their identities as gays or queers (Dean 2009, 105).

Another, seemingly less popular, subfield was mapped in the third section of *Porn Studies*, 'Pornography, Race and Class', beginning with Constance Penley's classic essay on the low-class status of much narrative pornography of the past decades ('The White Trashing of Porn'). This class-based approach was also developed by Laura Kipnis (1996) in her astute analysis of various 'low brow' tendencies in pornography, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. In the anthology, Penley's analysis was complemented by two attempts to better understand the popularity of racial stereotypes in pornography: in this case the 'undersexed' stereotype of the Asian American male (as discussed by Nguyen Tan Hoang in 'The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star') and the oversexed stereotype of the black man and woman (as discussed by myself in 'Skin Flicks on the Racial Border'). In all cases, class and race become special objects of eroticization as raced and classed bodies are asked to confess their special discursive 'truths.' The results are often a particularly blunt statement of the taboos that remain unspoken in more polite forms of culture.

In these essays we encounter what many pornography critics consider to be the limit of the serious study of this subject: the embrace of bad taste, crude humor and even worse racial fetishizations of skin, hair and sex organs. Indeed, if it often seems that debates within feminism about pornography rarely produce new knowledge about the artifacts, the phenomenon and the industry, it is because they never go beyond superficial judgments about sexism. Racially based analyses often do much the same. Film scholar Daniel Bernardi, for example, writes that 'watching pornography is not likely to lead to physical acts of violence such as rape, but it might lead to the perpetuation – or ignorance – of violent ideologies such as racism' (2006, 223). In this statement, Bernardi puts his finger on the reason for the relatively stunted development of this aspect of the field. To even broach the subject is to appear to revel in forms of racism and sexism that only degrade the 'others' depicted. Bernardi critiques the field of pornography studies for not doing more with race, while simultaneously scolding those scholars who do discuss race if they do not conclude that such pornography is beyond the pale, *only* racist, and without any further cultural or social interest. For example, he cites approvingly Richard Fung's criticism of the conflation of Asian with anus as if there was no more to say and without recognizing that in the realm of pornography such an identification may be quite welcome.[3] While Bernardi is careful not to call those few who have written about race and pornography in the US context racist, he does charge them with being insufficiently anti-racist. This brings us back to the same kind of false dichotomy

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between 'anti' or 'pro' pornography with which feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s were so entangled and which unfortunately seem to be continuing today.[4]

In these issues of class, race and gender we seem to encounter a bedrock problem: the perception that the *study* of pornography as a whole, and not just its racist or sexist elements, is also the *advocacy* of pornography. Even those of us who have been cast into falsely dichotomized 'pro' pornography or anti-censorship camps should consider ourselves as participating in the critical study of pornography. Real critique does not just take sides. It goes deep, it asks questions; it takes long historical views and it performs close analysis. If other critics want to argue that pornography is sexist and racist, then I want them to show how this is from a position of knowledge rather than willful ignorance. Real critique moves beyond taking sides in an anti-porn/pro-porn divide. As we will see in the final section of this essay, the name of the journal may colour this sense of position-taking.

A much less contentious aspect of the pornographic field was represented in the fourth section of *Porn Studies*: the intersection, as well as the sometimes rigorous separation, of 'soft core' and 'hard core' forms of sexual representation. Because of its controversy, hard-core pornography has received the lion's share of attention in a field that should reasonably have a stronger relation to soft-core erotic depictions. In this section of the anthology, Despina Kakoudaki demonstrated how World War II pin-ups were deployed to patriotic purposes while Eric Schaefer explained the crucial influence of 16-mm film technology in the transition from sexploitation erotica to hard-core, above-ground, narrative features. Schaefer identifies the importance of exploitation and, particularly, sexploitation cinema in the move to hard core. Here, again we encounter the opening of an extremely rich subfield pointing towards non-hard-core genres that have been immensely popular, especially with heterosexual couples and straight women.

Interestingly, the study of the 'soft core' has not been as affected by anti-pornography feminism as has the study of hard core. Indeed, soft core has invited no controversy at all. Where scholars of hard core have had to argue the 'legitimacy' of the pornographic field in relation to a vehement anti-pornography feminist stance that viewed the genre's explicit sexual representations as the quintessential example of the male objectification of female, in contrast Linda Ruth Williams (no relation), who pioneered a revolution in the academic and feminist study of soft core with her *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (2005), did not need to navigate these waters. Nor did David Andrews (2006), who followed with *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in Its Contexts*, and nor Nina Martin (2007) in her study *Sexy Thrills: Undressing the Erotic Thriller*.[5]

All of this work asserts the importance and popularity of a genre of soft-core erotica with a complicated history and legacy adjacent to pornography that has variously been disparaged both as sex film *manqué* (not explicit enough) and as a kind of soft pornography for women. Linda Ruth Williams, who calls it the cinematic equivalent of '*coitus interruptis*' (2005),[6] disparages its punch. Yet the fact remains that soft-core pornography appeals to both men and (especially to) women. The soft core examined by all of these writers can exist in its own right (as Andrews suggests), but it often simulates sex scenes laced with narrative thrills and danger. Williams, Andrews, and Martin illuminate a genre that frequently borrows from the traditions of the romance and the soap opera, but that also links up with the traditions of noir and thriller to create a potent hybrid.[7] The historical category of 'sexploitation'

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cinema is also flourishing, with new work by Eric Schaefer (forthcoming) and Elena Gorfinkel (20011a, 2011b).

A final section of my overstuffed anthology was devoted to 'Pornography and/as Avant-garde.' This section posited that critical studies of pornography and of the *avant-garde* can benefit by being considered in light of one another. In 'Toward a Recognition of a Pornographic Avant-garde,' Ara Osterweil examined Warhol's *Blow Job*, while Michael Sicinsky considered the connection between motion study and Scott Stark's highly edited interruptions of the familiar gestures of pornography in his 1998 film *Noema*. The *avant-garde* is not always pornography, and pornography is only rarely – as, say, in the work of Andy Warhol, Curt McDowell, Wakefield Poole, Carolee Schneeman, Barbara Rubin, Peggy Awesh or Bruce La Bruce – the *avant-garde*. Nevertheless, as I have argued recently in *Screening Sex* with respect to narrative art films, there is such a thing as hard-core art film that is hard-core in its explicitness, yet not pornography in a primary desire to arouse (Williams 2008a). Indeed, Kelly Dennis (2009) in *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* maintains that a hybrid, called 'Art/Porn,' has flourished since the fondling of statues in antiquity.

I do not pretend that the organization of *Porn Studies* mapped the entire field of pornography studies. There is a lot missing in it – most pointedly, the study of what started the proliferation of pornography studies to begin with: the mainstream, heterosexual hard core that has been comparatively ignored by all but anti-pornography scholars (O'Toole 1998). The exceptions may prove the rule: Laurence O'Toole's (1998) *Pornocopia* is an engaging informative book, while David Loftus (2002) introduced a breath of fresh air by interviewing a great many men about how they use mainstream pornography. But both of these books are journalistic studies rather than scholarly tomes. A healthy academic field of pornography studies needs many more histories and analyses of the mainstream business and its many genres. Another part of the field that needs further cultivation is the absolutely essential connection between new technologies and the pornographies that often enable them. Here I do not mean the kind of hysterical reaction so typical of studies of internet pornography, but historical/theoretical studies of the intersection of public policy, new technologies, and embodied life by scholars as diverse as Joseph Slade (2001), Eric Schaefer (1999), Jane Juffer (1998) and Wendy Chun (2006).

The above description of the field of pornography studies suggests that parts of it are indeed thriving, while others remain untended. There are some obvious reasons for the neglect, some of which I have suggested. But we must first ask what exactly constitutes and legitimizes an academic field of study? A field is a branch of knowledge at the college or university level, recognized by learned societies and by academic journals in which its research is published. So now that this field has obtained an academic journal and the opportunity to publish peer-reviewed articles, what else does it need?

## The archive

Archives are places where artifacts are collected, organized and preserved and to which scholars or other interested parties need to have access. The 'porn archive,' which exists more as an idea than a reality, has rarely benefited from any of these qualities. In the introduction to the recent anthology *Porn Archives* (Dean,

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Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming), Tim Dean takes issue with my own lament over the relative lack of an archive bolstering the academic field of pornography studies.[8] Citing Derrida's (1995) *Archive Fever*, and the recognition that archives must be thought about in terms of destruction as well as preservation, Dean correctly notes that, of all archives, pornography's has been the most subject to destruction. At the same time, it is tremendously important and he asks 'what kind of archaeology of human sexuality would be possible without porn archives?' (Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming, 7) Again, I agree, but these archives also must be taken with a grain of salt. They are not necessarily evidence of actual or ordinary sexual practices. For one thing, the women who perform in them were often, in the days of stag films, paid prostitutes and already performing sex for the camera (L. Williams 2005).[9] Dean is also more sanguine than I am about the wide destruction of the 'porn archive.' He passes over the censorship and destruction of so many earlier archives in order to delight in the many ways in which 'anyone with a phone and Internet access may become a pornographer' and thus find themselves, inadvertently 'archived,' as in the case of former Congressman Anthony Weiner (Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming, 10). Because 'digital images automatically encode metadata that serve an archival function,' Dean confidently argues that 'every digital image has virtually unlimited audience potential built into its structure.' Thus far from suffering a dearth of archives, he claims we have a 'surfeit of them' (forthcoming, 11–12).

We may indeed currently have a surfeit of these inadvertent archives, but to what extent do these random 'gotchas' function as actual archives? Are they collected, organized, preserved and, despite their apparent ubiquity, do we really have long-term access to them? Here Dean is too cavalier: he delights in the inherent 'ungovernability of the digital image,' but assumes that present ubiquity translates to future permanence (Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming, 11). Thus while Dean is entirely correct to point out the contrast between the nineteenth-century 'Secret Museum' that built its archive of pornography out of strict secrecy and limited access (gentlemen only), and the current *apparent* accessibility of any digital archive, he elides the fact that the Secret Museum was actually an archive, in the sense of being collected, organized and preserved, while the digital archive of pornography simply does not exist, even amongst those visionaries who have taken the trouble to archive other moving image ephemera. Rick Prelinger, for example, whose archive of 5000 digitized titles and whose collection of over 60,000 pieces of 'ephemera' including advertisements, educational, industrial and amateur films and whose archive is a model of democratic access, does not collect pornography of any kind.[10] What guarantee, beyond the present sense of ubiquity and accessibility, do we have that the 'porn archives' will enjoy the kind of organization and preservation that a place like the locked chamber of the Museo Borbonico enjoyed? This is where Dean's assumption that any digital image of sex endures forever, and his further assumption that 'porn is itself an archive' – of sex, of fantasy, of desire, of bodies and their actions, and of pleasure – needs emendation. It is not an archive if it is not preserved. And scholars of the digital have been quick to point out that digital technologies are not the solution to the preservation of moving-image archives (Cherchi Usai 2001; Enticknap 2007; Cherchi Usai et al. 2008). Despite warnings from archivists that digital technologies are vulnerable to hard-drive crashes, viruses, unauthorized alteration and obsolescence of formats, and despite the well-known

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fact that there is no known medium for long-term storage of digital data that matches the performance of film for both longevity and integrity, digital utopians continue to believe that what there is a 'surfeit' of now will somehow endure. Experience suggests that it will not.

Dean also puts his faith in those archives that reveal the 'passions of the collector,' however incomplete, disordered and subjective they may be. But again, are these really archives or ideas of archives? Two of the examples Dean cites are simply not archives in any functioning way. For even though it is important that many sexual minorities have used pornography as a form of cultural memory, where are the ongoing resources that will guarantee the actual preservation of these memories? Dean cites Thomas Waugh's (1996) documentation of private archives of gay male photography and film pornography as proof of the existence of these archives, but one only has to read Waugh's account of his difficulties extracting materials from the Kinsey Institute to understand the absolute precarity of the archive from which he worked. Dean also cites the example of Samuel Delany's (1999) 'archiving' of his reminiscences of the queer activities of the patrons of heterosexual porn theaters of Times Square before their destruction in the late 1990s in *Times Square Red; Times Square Blue*. But again, is Delany's wonderful memoir an archive? Is it not rather a celebration of what has been lost? And are those films themselves preserved?

Dean argues that an individual scholar's assemblage of various sources, just as much as an amateur's stash of comics or porn, may be regarded as an archive (Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming, 16). It certainly may 'be regarded' as one, but unless its objects are collected, identified and preserved and unless one has access to it, it is only in the loosest sense possible an archive. Finally, while Dean celebrates the possible counter uses to which archives may be put and the miraculous survival of various minoritarian archives against all odds, he does not reassure me that by naming any private collection of pornography an archive, it will endure to serve anyone else in that function.

Archives also make possible the generation of canons, which are typically in flux as different scholars, archivists and audiences make new discoveries of formerly 'lost' works and as tastes and audiences change. Speaking only of my own experience of the film porn archive, I contend that the canon of film pornography has been created by too few scholars and with the aid of so little preservation that we really have no idea what it actually was during the contemporary circulation of these films. Many of the titles I analyzed in *Hard Core* in an attempt to characterize the genre as a whole have been taken by others to be canonical, but in fact they are simply the examples I chose that were then available to me either in the Kinsey Institute for the stag era or through rentals in my local video stores. There was no systematically collected or preserved archive with which I worked and there is not one to this day. Not enough consensus was built up around these films through criticism and recorded reactions to call them canonical.

## Books and anthologies

In the absence of scholarly societies, academic conferences, and archives, what we have in great profusion – albeit sometimes the haphazard profusion of weeds – are anthologies. Some of these are essential and field defining, such as Lynn Hunt's

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(1993) incomparable *The Invention of Pornography*; some of them are lively grab-bags, such as *Porn 101* (Elias et al. 1999), my own *Porn Studies* (Williams 2004) or the feminist collections *Dirty Looks* (Church Gibson and Gibson 1993) and *More Dirty Looks* (Church Gibson 2004).[11] While enormously important and influential, anthologies alone cannot sustain a field. Too often they take the place of more sustained scholarly work, showing a preference for dabbling rather than digging into a fertile academic field. In many cases there seems to be an avoidance of sustained individual research and scholarship that is still the coin of the realm in the humanities.

Indeed, in my estimation there are fewer than 20 single-authored books that might be said to have made a real contribution to the academic field of pornography studies. I count the contributions of Susan Sontag, Steven Marcus, Angela Carter, Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, Walter Kendrick, Thomas Waugh, Joseph Slade, myself, Laura Kipnis, Linda Ruth Williams, Dave Andrews, Eric Schaefer, and Tim Dean. The work of these authors seems likely to endure as field-shaping serious scholarship. And if I include the work of two anti-pornography feminists on this list it is because, for better or for worse, they have been influential in shaping the field. Much as I disagree with them, their work has shaped my own. The work of others who oppose pornography, if they are scholarly, original and researched, belong in a peer-reviewed academic journal. It is striking how small this list is, even given the adjustments that others might make to it, and especially if one compares it with book-length studies of other controversial genres of cultural production. Nor can we blame the timidity of university presses, many of whom are willing to publish such work and are willing, moreover, to overcome the difficulty of printing explicit images (Kleinhans 2007). If we compare, for example, the robust field of film and video horror, which seems to publish a new book every month, we can sense the difference between a truly thriving field and one that seems more sporadic, always about to happen.[12] We can hope that now that there is an editorial board to vet the quality of contributions, the pornography field will become more serious and substantive in its historiography, theory and analysis. Sometimes, of course, like any 'emerging' field, there is a need to rely upon an outsider – even outlaw – status to invite initial interest. Unfortunately, however, the kind of interest attracted in these outlier studies is too often of the passing, sensationalizing, rather than the academic field-building, kind.[13]

## Pornography, porno, porn

Under this subheading, I discuss another problem, inherent in the very titles of many of the anthologies I have discussed, including my own, and including the journal you are holding this minute: the very term *porn*. In everything I have said so far, I have tended to use what might be called the vernacular approach to the field. I have slid into the habit, not initially familiar to me, of calling the subject matter, the archives in question, the very name of the field: 'porn.' How have we come to designate a field of academic study by this name? Why have we lost the *graph* – the part of the word that indicates that it is a form of creation, representation, even, as the word itself means, a kind of writing. And when I say we, I certainly mean me too since my 2004 anthology was entitled *Porn Studies*. In my 1989 book on pornography, although I sometimes used 'hard-core' as a vernacular synonym for the noun

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pornography and sometimes as an adjective to distinguish it from soft core (as in 'hard-core pornography'), I tended to use the word pornography to signal the focus on explicitness and 'maximum visibility' of sex acts in contradistinction to obfuscation of soft core. But in the 1999 epilogue to the second edition of *Hard Core*, the more vernacular word 'porno' began to creep in.[14] Looking back from the vantage point of 1999, I find that I exhibit a certain fondness for the ambitions of the 'classical era,' when moving-image pornography told stories and explored sexual fantasies while still aspiring to be more like mainstream films. In this epilogue I slipped into the use of both 'porn' and 'porno' to refer to moving-image pornography as if to say that after 10 years of study the object had been with us long enough to have a nickname that signals our new *comfort* with it (Williams 1989, 298).

By the time I published my 2004 anthology of writings about the genre, entitled simply *Porn Studies*, it would seem that I had embraced the shortest of these terms wholeheartedly and was using it exclusively to describe the entire field of study. In fact, I had lost an argument with my well-respected editor and agreed to cede my original title, *Pornographies on/scene*, to *Porn Studies*. For Duke University Press, my subtle word-play between 'ob/scene' and 'on/scene' was too grounded in a paradoxical understanding of the simultaneous revelation and concealment implied by the slash. My preferred title wanted to signal the historical change that had occurred between an era when all explicit sex was considered ob/scene and kept, as that root word signaled, *off*/scene and the more contemporary moment when contemporary ob/scenities were proliferating on/scene. Connecting the familiar ob/scene with the neologism on/scene while stressing the instability of the slash that differentiates what is 'off or on' scene, this title wanted to suggest that explicit pornographies still bear traces of their once-forbidden status – of their situation at some limit. Another reason for the rejection of this title is that the publishing example of combining the idea of academic study with the short, familiar word 'porn' had already been set by the anthology *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment* (Elias et al. 1999). Since then the field has seen a number of books and articles with some form of this familiar abbreviation – Kelly Dennis's (2009) *Art/Porn*, and Feona Attwood's (2010) *porn.com Making Sense of Online Pornography*, which mixes both – all of which have signaled, one way or another, a certain acceptance, or at least a lack of objection to the very fact of the existence of pornography 'on/scene.'

In contrast, and although it is not consistently so, it is striking how many of the articles or books that wish to signal disapproval of the genre typically use the full term pornography. For example, Drucilla Cornell's (2000) excellent anthology *Feminism and Pornography* is careful to include the more scholarly debates on both sides. Also, Daniel Bernardi's (2006) 'Interracial Joysticks: Pornography's Web of Racist Attractions' or Todd Morrison's (2004) *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography: Pornucopia* whose inclusion of both terms marks both an embrace and a disapproval of its subject via an anti-pornography feminist perspective. There is also Gail Dines, Robert Jensen, and Ann Russo's (1997) *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality* as well as Karen Boyle's (2010) *Everyday Pornography*, although there is also Dines's (2010) more recent *Pornland; How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*.

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The very use of the more formal full word *pornography* has thus inclined towards anti-pornography and pro-censorship positions. But it also signals the higher ground of a more scholarly, distanced and critical approach. And I believe this is the term that a scholarly journal, which belongs on higher ground, should adopt. It can be a slippery slope from the defense of the First Amendment to endorsing *a priori* the value of sexual explicitness as an inevitable march towards progress.[15] Pornographies on/scene are a fact that needs to be recognized. They are not necessarily a form of freedom or liberation that must necessarily be embraced. The last thing I wanted to suggest with the publication of *Porn Studies* – or the use of that title – was that proliferating pornographies had been brought unproblematically on/scene. What I wanted to convey, and what probably would have been better expressed had I kept the original title, was the inevitability of an ongoing conflict, a perpetual push–pull between on/scenity and ob/scenity as a part of the neoliberal dilemma of an ever-expanding market for all sorts of sexual representations. And that market obviously includes the one for scholarly books, journals and anthologies about pornography.

Inherent to my own terminological shift, from 'pornography' to 'porno' to 'porn,' is the act of placing oneself 'on the side of' an industry whose main purpose is to make money by enacting sexual fantasies. Although I certainly want to respect the dignity of sex workers and support better, safer working conditions for them, and although I also want to uphold 'freedoms' of speech and to encourage diverse forms of pornography, I believe there is a risk in aligning our own work of scholarship too closely with the work of the pornography industry – even when what that industry produces seems more diverse, transgressive, or experimental than the usual fare. When scholars of pornography adopt the slang of an industry for the name of their object of study, it is a little like film or cinema studies calling itself 'movie studies' or 'flick studies.' The field of film studies has worked hard to earn the respect it now has in the academy and it has done so by not associating itself too closely with mainstream Hollywood. It retains a critical (dis)stance. Pornography Studies needs to work even harder to adopt a stance independent from its major industry. I do not mean that we should avoid all industry terms, which are often quite eloquent. But when we name the field in which we work, we should be scholars, historians, and critics and especially good ones. To be a pornography scholar one does not need to love the genre but one does need to *know* the genre – its long history, its various theorizations, and its many forms of criticism. And, of course, this knowledge, as we saw above, must necessarily come from archives.

Related to this question of terminology is that of scholarly tone. I once described Steven Marcus as writing the whole of his ground-breaking study of Victorian pornography – *The Other Victorians* (Marcus 1974) – as if he was holding his nose. I wished to introduce a different tone, not that of the high literary scholar deigning to soil himself with a brief immersion in the materials of the Kinsey Institute, but in my case as a film scholar taking pornography seriously as a genre. Obviously scholarly tones can be complicated. Behind Marcus's tone of disdain there lurked a prurient interest that gave his work an intriguing tension. My generation of pornography scholars and the generation that has followed (which includes many of the editors of this journal) have mostly made a point of *not* holding its nose and have often been willing to admit its own interest, fascination, and personal predilections for certain kinds of pornography. We have also sometimes described sexual acts in the vernacular rather than hiding behind Latinate terms. In doing so, we have tried to

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'speak plainly' and not occult our possible attraction to or fascination with the genre behind a veneer of false objectivity. So, by this reasoning, if 'blow job' seems more in the spirit of what you are describing than 'fellatio,' then it has seemed ok to say it.[16] At stake, however, is how much one wants to speak from the point of view of a subjective participant in sex acts and as a subjective viewer-user-player of films, videos, or interactive games. Over the last 30 years we have all grown more familiar with pornography and so we have tried to signal that familiarity, although sometimes at a cost.

The moniker 'Porn Studies' makes a judgment. It implies that the user himself or herself is not shocked by these objects, these images, these sounds, these soft or hard-core depictions. It signals that such work is not obscene to me, and for me at least – if not for those of you who call it by its more formal term pornography – I approve of bringing it not only into the home, where it has already been for almost three decades, but also into the academy. It implies that I do not wish to partake any more in the debates about the very existence of pornography. Although I am sure my argument is doomed, I do want to assert here that such familiarity, even geniality, towards pornography may not be the best approach for an academic field. Because pornography is so often the first user and pioneer of new media technologies it will always be forging new territory and new controversies in its fantasies not only of desire and pleasure but also of death, humiliation and degradation. I would therefore not agree with Feona Attwood when she worries about what will happen to the Secret Museum of pornography when there are no more museums to hide it away in, or when she asks 'how will the "secret of sex" continue to be produced once it has been so exhaustively revealed' (2002, 99). My first response to Attwood is to ask: where are the secret or public museums preserving this history? My second is to say that I am not as worried as she is that pornographies can exhaustively reveal the 'secrets' of sex. Rather, to think this way is to think of sex as a fixed thing that more accurate and more pervasive media technologies simply reflect. But this is never the case. Pornography and sex have always had a mutual influence on one another and there will always be some new limit, shifting the borders of on/scenity and ob/scenity.

I am fully aware that my terminological objection is probably not going to change many minds. Queer folks will probably go on saying 'porn' to signal their solidarity with a pornography that has been so important to their emerging identities. Others will want to signal their lack of concern with limits, their acceptance of all the transgressions of the genre. Perhaps all I can say is that we should be aware that we have a choice when we name what we study, whether porn, porno, or the word that still connotes the 'graphic' nature that is so much at issue here: pornography.

## At the limit

Watching pornography is always partly a matter of looking for that place where something goes too far, the place that exceeds our personal limits. We might not have a name for what that limit is but, as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart long ago declared, 'we know it when we see it.' Limit is the place where we inevitably say 'Stop! This is where I draw the line!' Pornography is characterized by its tendency to provoke the need for such limits, and anti-pornography feminists have drawn the line with the publication of this journal and the proliferation of pornographies online.[17]

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The limit is the place where pornographies seem to need to get distinguished one from another; it is the place where some pornographies such as those exemplified by the divine Marquis, or by the fantasy and the practice of barebacking, or the enactment of fantasies of rape, always seem to invite us to draw the line. Indeed, I would say that the limit, 'at the limit,' is the place where life gets transformed into death, where Georges Bataille's 'taboo observed with fear' evokes the desire that depends upon it and we come face to face with something that is beyond pleasure, dirty, perhaps even fatal ([1957] 1986, 37–38).

Let me give an example of how the business of pornography negotiates this idea of limits. If I wish to purchase a work of pornographic video from the website of Treasure Island Media, I must make a pre-judgment about my reaction to the sexual acts that may be depicted within. The entry to this site requires me to click OK at the bottom of a long paragraph that tells me what I am consenting to. Many of the acts described are highly Latinate. If I click OK at the bottom, it means that:

> I am a consenting adult who desires to and legally may view this material; I do not find graphic depictions of the activities listed above or any activities deriving from erotic or sexual attraction or passion distasteful, repugnant or obscene to my sensitivities and, therefore, I freely and so informed waive any right I may have to be protected from 'obscene' material by Title 189, United States Code … and any and all other laws of similar nature or intent …

To purchase this pornography, then, I have to say in advance that nothing in them will exceed my own personal limit, that I already know they are not obscene to me. Furthermore, I assent to describing myself as a person who desires to see these mysterious activities and that, having done so, 'I will not act as informant or appear as a witness in any action taken against TIM [Treasure Island Media].'

Now, of course I understand that this is a legal ploy. I will click OK because by now I am really curious to know what the words 'irrumation' or 'urolagnia' mean, but I am partly clicking OK precisely because I know that these works may challenge the limits of what I want to see: I may find them ob/scene in the literal sense of that word. In other words, in order to satisfy my curiosity, I have to proclaim myself to be someone who has no limits. This is, at the limit, what the familiarity of 'porn studies' does. It implies that everything is OK and misses the point that I want to watch precisely because it may not be. But, of course, it is also possible that this disclaimer exists to dramatize a 'transgression of limits' in a form that actually has so many rules there is not that much transgression left. After all, the worst thing that could happen to pornography, as my citation from Attwood suggested, is that it become banal. It is possible, then, that this disclaimer is all about giving me the impression that the work is breaking taboos that are not really broken.

In asking me to give up my limits, Treasure Island Media may actually, as Damon Young has noted, be 'instating those limits through its very rhetoric and announcing itself, precisely, as what will go beyond them.'[18] This, ultimately, is my criticism of Tim Dean's work on barebacking. For in seeming to actually believe in the disclaimer, Dean wants to convince himself that he is doing ethnography on a community through its pornography. In other words, he seems to believe the fantasy. The video may look like a documentary, it may engage real bodies penetrating and being penetrated in all sorts of ways, but it is also an erotic fantasy that depends on

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erecting the limits it wants to seem to transcend. Pornography on film, video, or the internet is always two contradictory things at once: documents of sexual acts, and fantasies spun around knowing the pleasure or pain of those acts. Pornography studies needs to remember that it must always exist at the problematic site of this limit.

**Acknowledgements**

This article is a revision of an essay originally to be published in *Porn Archives* (Dean, Ruszczycky and Squires, forthcoming). It has been revised for the occasion of this inaugural issue of *Porn Studies*. Thanks to Sanjay Hukku, Damon Young and Dolores McElroy for invaluable help.

## Notes

1. Controversy erupted when, after the publication of this new journal *Porn Studies* was announced, a petition was circulated by the group Stop Porn Culture arguing that the claim the journal is operating 'under the auspices of neutrality' is false since it has a pro-porn bias; 880 signatures were gathered (Cadwalladr June 15, 2013).
2. I refer to two historically succeeding lesbian feminist journals: *Off Our Backs*, an anti-pornography journal that began in 1970 and ceased publication in 2008, which occupied the position of portraying lesbian sex as positive and natural; and the 1984 'dyke' reply, *On Our Backs*, which not only challenged the anti-pornography stance of its predecessor and continues today, but in addition morphed into the production of lesbian pornography (through Fatale Video). These lesbian pornographies, in contrast to the more politically correct gentleness of *Off Our Backs*, celebrated butch/femme, dildo wielding, and sadomasochistic lesbian fantasies. See Butler (2004).
3. Bernardi is also one of the few scholars to agree with the first version of Kobena Mercer's famous analysis of Mapplethorpe's nude photographs of black men. Mercer published an initial article attacking Mapplethorpe in 1986, and a second article revising the first in 1989. He then combined them in the 1992 article 'Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary.' See Mercer (1994).
4. For example, Bernardi describes me as a 'radical sex feminist' scholar who writes about 'the virtues of pornography' (2006, 220–243).
5. Elena Gorfinkel (2011b) has published 'Tales of Times Square: Sexploitation's Secret History of Place' while her book-length study of sexploitation cinema is coming down the pike, as is Eric Schaefer's *Massacre of Pleasure: A History of Sexploitation Films, 1960–1979*.
6. 'If hardcore really does it, softcore merely fakes it. If hardcore hangs on the authenticity of the real view (that adolescent shock of seeing people *actually getting off*), softcore holds back, cannot show, kisses but finally does not tell' (L.R. Williams 2005, 269–270).
7. Portions of the above section on soft core are excerpted from my review for *Film Quarterly*, 'Studying "Soft" Sex' (Williams 2008b).
8. In an earlier version of this article appearing in *Porn Archives* (Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires, forthcoming).
9. In my article for *The Moving Image*, '"White Slavery" Versus the Ethnography of "Sexworkers": Women in Stag Film at the Kinsey Archive' (Williams 2005), I note that we cannot assume that the archive of human sexuality is congruent with the archive of pornography, although I agree with Dean that the 'porn archive' gives us a glimpse into the 'sex archive.' For one thing, the female performers in the 'porn archive' of the stag period were very often prostitutes while the men were not.
10. Given its goal of collecting, preserving and facilitating access to films of historic significance that have not been collected elsewhere, and its dedication to 'ephemera' – usually the term for pornographic works – this practice does not bode well for the preservation of and access to the pornographic tradition on film, video and digital formats.

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11. Other anthologies include *porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography* (Attwood 2010).
12. David Andrews (2006) makes this astute observation in *Soft in the Middle*.
13. Perhaps I am here idealizing the gravitas of other more legitimate fields.
14. For example, I title one subsection of this epilogue '"The 'Classical Era" of Theatrically Exhibited Porno.'
15. See, for example, Steven Maddison's claim that there is an 'elision between advancing toward the new millennium and advancing toward a more open speaking of sex that strongly accords with Modernist notions of progress' (2010, 21).
16. It is also worth considering whether 'blow job' is an apt term. Blowing is rarely what one sees done in that particular sex act; in fact, quite the contrary. If you then choose the Latinate term, as I have mostly done, there is still the further problem of knowing how to pronounce it. During the first talk on pornography I ever gave, I consistently pronounced fellatio 'fellahtio,' until a kind colleague took me aside and corrected me.
17. I should explain here that my original paper for the volume *Porn Archives* (Dean, Ruszczycky and Squires, forthcoming), of which this is a much revised version, was prompted by a very different title than the one that emerged. It was a call for papers under the title 'At the Limit: Pornography and the Humanities,' and it rested partly on the inference that pornography might want to lodge itself as a field in the Humanities, as if to say to the Humanities: what do you think of that! It is this quality of provocation that I believe the academic field of pornography studies needs to temper if it is to successfully cultivate its fields. Although I take issue with many of Tim Dean's ideas about pornography and the archive, I thank him for organizing the conference and book that became *Porn Archives* and for his innovative work.
18. In an email message to me on 24 March 2010, Young continues: 'This is a ploy to bolster the aura around its own product, to produce an authentically shocking and transgressive pornography amidst a sea of banality.'

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