

Introduction

Democratizing Pornography

This book is about the relationships between law, social movements, and political strategy. It does three key things. First, it demonstrates why indie porn is valuable. It documents its liberatory promises, its aspirations to democratize the kind of content we see, visions to pioneer more ethical production practices, and desires to change our relationships not only to sex but also to media, society, and capitalism. Second, it argues that in order to build just and equitable sexual cultures we need to overhaul the international regulatory infrastructure that governs sex and create enabling economic, technological, and legal environments. For independent sexual media to thrive, we require a reassessment of how classifiers understand risk, how platforms conceptualize harm, how businesses extract labor, and how governments value pleasure. Third, it examines the creative strategies of the indie porn movement to resist dominant structures, generate alternative cultures, and build liberatory futures. Because indie pornographies both resist and are shaped by their regulatory environments, they offer lessons about stigma, respectability, and co-optation. In the pages to come, I argue that watching, listening, and

paying attention to indie pornographies tells us at once about the dangerous functions of neoliberal regulatory systems but also about the creative tactics and strategies of social movements that deliberately (and provocatively) butt up against them.

Revolutionary Promises

Since the early 2000s, a vibrant international movement has flourished across the world, pioneering online pornography that has been variously labeled as *DIY*, indie, feminist, ethical, queer, alt, and, more recently, fair trade, artisanal, cruelty-free, and even organic. International porn film festival circuits have emerged in Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Germany, France, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, to name a few. Queer, feminist, and indie porn films are being produced throughout Asia, with a thriving porn movement in South and Central America. Chinese artists, such as Fan Popo (whose film series *The Hutong Vibe* was billed as Beijing's first queer feminist porn), have relocated to Berlin to produce and screen their work. As technologies are becoming increasingly affordable and intuitive, producers are taking up the charge of various feminist pornographers. Candida Royalle, who established Femme Productions in the 1980s, insisted that women must take control of the reins of production (Comella 2016, 96). Annie Sprinkle, who pioneered post-porn-modernism mixing sex, art, and activism, famously asserted, "The answer to bad porn isn't no porn. It's better porn" (Sprinkle and Leigh 2002). In 2016 feminist pornographer Madison Young released the *DIY Porn Handbook: A How-to Guide to Documenting Our Own Sexual Revolution*, which provides hands-on advice for shooting, editing, distributing, and "guerrilla marketing" films and encourages audiences to "make the porn you want to see!"

For many producers, indie porn production is being heralded as a mechanism for social change. Feminist pornographies are being described as both "a genre and a political vision" (Taormino et al. 2013, 18), *DIY* pornographies are being heralded as a "socio-political movement" (Young 2016, 11), and others are being described as "interventionist pornography" that can "queer capitalism through alternative economic practices" (Saunders 2020, 275). Indie porn projects themselves make claim to a revolutionary politics, from Courtney Trouble's site *Indie Porn Revolution* ("subversive smut made by ladies, artists and queers") to films like Chelsea Poe's *Fucking against Fascism*, the profits from which are donated to Trans Lifeline and Black Lives Matter. Australian producers Sensate Films even coined the designation "Slow Porn Revolution,"

rejecting the capitalist production of “fast porn” and aligning themselves with movements for slow food and slow fashion by focusing on ethically aware, local, and sustainable productions. The Abya Yala shorts at the 2020 San Francisco PornFilmFestival, curated by Érica Sarmet, demonstrate how pornography can be a medium for “a collective subaltern resistance movement” to deconstruct the relationships between sex and colonization. Films in their curated program spoke to the relationships between bodies, sexualities, geographies, colonization, forced Christianization, epistemicide, military dictatorships, and Indigenous and Black genocide. In these iterations, indie pornographies are centering new voices, visions, and standpoints for what pornography can be and for whom.

DIY pornographies herald a promise to not only diversify but also *democratize* pornography. They are concerned not simply with the final product, but with the overarching *process*. As performers move behind the camera, self-funding and self-publishing their work, they are no longer models appearing in someone else’s project, but authors of their own fantasies, curating their own images. As porn production moves away from major studios and into homes and bedrooms, accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, individuals can film, edit, and sell their own content, thereby increasing the range of visible bodies, genders, aesthetics, and sexual practices, with the potential to dilute dominant representations and to change viewers’ relationships to sex. Production is no longer confined to California’s so-called Porn Valley. Instead, pornography can now be filmed on one’s smartphone, in one’s home, and by one’s friend—instigating the new genre of iPornography (Pink Label 2014).

Indie porn, as I argue in the pages ahead, is making waves in production values by challenging traditional production ethics. Because so many indie producers have ventured away from working for porn companies to create and star in their own content, they have brought an increased focus on the rights of performers, collaborative decision-making, and transparency. Porn performers are strategizing to create systems of mutual aid, resource exchange, and skill sharing. They are active in adult and youth sex education, leading discussions on consent culture and sexual health. Some are rejecting extractive labor practices by insisting on joint ownership of the final media project or profit-sharing arrangements that value collective cooperation. In these moments, independent pornographies are working to decentralize the industry in ways that go further than simply diversifying content—they seek to redistribute power, labor, and wealth in global media production.

The liberatory promises of indie porn, then, are not simply about the content. They are about our relationship to work. Indie pornographies aim to

revolutionize conventional relations of worker/producer and labor/profit by reducing reliance on intermediaries and offering solo and community producers greater control. As platforms enable the sale of custom clips and direct-to-consumer forms of distribution, new technologies have been celebrated as having the capacity to “destroy the careers of professionals,” acting as a social and economic equalizer (Coopersmith 2008, 49). The dwindling reliance on being hired for studio shoots means that performers are now increasingly in positions to speak out against unjust and unethical practices in the industry. Whether threatening to destroy the industry or simply to reshape it, these avenues to participate have been conceptualized as a form of *sabotage*. Access to production technologies offer individuals and communities the potential to disrupt or intercept the wealth of multinational conglomerates (Preciado 2013, 38). At least, this has been the theory.

Regulatory Fantasies

However, it is here that indie pornographies hit major hurdles, tensions that this book is concerned about. In practice, the promises of indie porn sit against a backdrop of erotophobic regulatory paranoia. User-generated porn is frequently produced in environments in which the production, sale, screening, and/or advertising of pornography is criminalized through a complex web of classification and criminal and broadcasting laws. Prohibitions on content disproportionately impact queer sexual practices and women’s body fluids and permit narrow representations of sex and sexuality. The sexist, queerphobic, ableist, and racist legal frameworks that govern pornography are based on simplistic narratives about the value and effects of sexual representations and do little to protect the well-being of performers. They are based on regulatory *fantasies* of what porn is and does. These fantasies are ultimately counterproductive: They foreclose the kinds of initiatives that could directly improve the experiences of both performers and consumers. Indeed, public debates about risk and danger consistently ignore the issues performers repeatedly raise—privacy, stigma, data security, industrial rights, compensation, workplace health and safety, unionization, discrimination, and access to justice. The experiences of indie performers and producers challenge the underlying logics of regulators, who appear completely divorced from the realities of porn production.

But it is not only the legal context that poses a problem. Independent producers are working within a saturated market and global gig economy that demands high volumes of material and expects it for free. They are navigating an

increasingly privatized online space with blanket bans on sexual media, communication, expression, and advertising through restrictive terms of use and narrow community standards. The ability to use pornography as a medium to effect social and political change is constrained by the sweeping sanitization, gentrification, and rigorous policing of sex in online space. While social media platforms obsess about nipples (building classifiers to identify nudity), hosting services and streaming platforms ban the depiction of body fluids (including menstrual blood, breast milk, and urine) and non-procreative sexual practices (such as fisting, pegging, and G-spot ejaculation). Sex workers, sex educators, and sexual subcultures are maliciously flagged, suspended, demoted, demonetized, and deplatformed, treated simply as collateral damage. Algorithmic tagging and ranking systems benefit white performers and afford lower visibility and earning potential to Black performers, Indigenous performers, and people of color, thereby perpetuating racial stratification in the industry.

These conditions are not conducive to radical content. All of this provides an incentive for indie producers to create content that is safe, sanitized, and risk-averse and clips that are likable, clickable, and geared to eliciting search engine results. It maintains an environment in which tube sites (the new corporate giants of pornography) monopolize the market by pirating independent content or requesting it for free in turn for exposure or traffic. Meanwhile, tube sites like Pornhub and Brazzers (both formally owned by the company MindGeek, now acquired by private equity firm Ethical Capital Partners and rebranded as Aylo) sustain their business through massive advertising revenue. They dominate search engine optimization (SEO) to outrank smaller websites in Google search results, regardless of whether they actually have the content (a Google search for “Crashpad porn,” for example, indicates hits for Pornhub even though Pornhub does not host any of Pink and White Production’s original and iconic queer Crash Pad Series). By financial necessity, small or solo producers often flock to companies with the highest percentage of payouts, leaving small hosting and streaming companies struggling for volume and traffic.

This is hardly the redistribution of wealth and power that indie producers hoped for. With multiple disparate income streams, performer payouts can be convoluted and heavily diluted by the few payment processors that allow adult content. The largest profits from the online porn market end up in the hands of tech companies, consumers come to expect porn for free, and selling porn becomes unviable for independent producers, resulting in the erasure of vibrant sexual cultures from online space. The precarious positioning of porn workers in a global marketplace dominated by multinational corporations is

sustained by neoliberal policies that leave marginalized workers without protection to fend for themselves. Just when indie porn is poised for maximum impact—to democratize, deprofessionalize, and redistribute—it is stymied by a unique convergence of capitalist and regulatory forces. Porn regulation has historically been predictable and heavy-handed, struggling to keep pace with technological developments. But now, in addition to the tired practices of prohibition, we are witnessing reinvigorated forms of regulation ripple across the industry through commercial practices of extraction, assimilation, co-optation, and intermediary power that quash and dilute the potential of indie pornographies.

Resistance Politics

Following on from the promises and limitations of indie porn movements, this book focuses on the various strategies indie porn producers deploy for political currency, economic survival, and legal recognition in the context of regulatory overkill and economic downturn. As I outline in the chapters ahead, indie producers are savvy. They have campaigned for consumers to pay for their porn, launched affiliate programs to incentivize referrals, diversified their income streams, and found innovative methods of distribution. In some cases, they have turned offline to retro forms of distribution, such as print, art, and festivals. In other cases, they have found workarounds to sell personalized content direct to consumers or digitally minted non-fungible tokens (NFTs) as a way to mitigate the effects of piracy. Against the legacy of centralized production in mainstream studios, indie producers have pitched their work as documentary, authentic, fair trade, and artisanal and themselves as creators of unique and custom content. Trans performers in particular have become what Sophie Pezzutto (2020) calls “porntropreneurs,” workers in an increasingly precarious gig economy where “even hustlers need side hustles.” Individuals are finding new ways to differentiate their products and capture a market niche in the context of eroding welfare states, proliferating piracy, and discrimination against adult businesses.

This is where indie porn holds lessons for other social movements. In their more neoliberal iterations, indie pornographies present an appeal for diversity and inclusion, toward a pluralistic vision of participation. They differentiate themselves from so-called mainstream porn by positioning themselves as a more progressive alternative. This, I argue, is less of a revolutionary move and more of a marketplace intervention, with producers invested in creating a greater variety of viable alternatives for consumers. But in their more

politicized and radical iterations, indie pornographies go beyond representational critique and issue a more destabilizing challenge that deconstructs how and why we categorize, produce, and regulate sexual material at all. In these moments, indie pornographies offer a “post-pornographic” interrogation that contests the category of pornography altogether. They critique the processes through which value is placed on particular practices or bodies and question why sexually explicit media is sequestered from other forms of art and culture.

There are numerous pitfalls that come with social movement work. At present there are proposals to codify, certify, and label *ethical porn*, with some seeking to professionalize the industry by granting stamps of approval to guide consumers. While these interventions are sparking important ethical debates, the criteria used for determining which porn is *good* have sometimes relied on class-based ideas of taste or conflated ethics with legality. The risks in creating bounded categories of *ethical porn* are that they can simply be co-opted by tube sites wanting their corporate brand to appear to be diverse and inclusive (without changing their operating structures); that so-called *good porn* might be codified narrowly by governments, leaving everything at the fringes still (or further) criminalized; or that the self-congratulatory audiences who only consume bourgeois, fair trade pornography produce further hierarchies of stigma that marginalize workers who do not have access to industry certification. There are serious challenges ahead to ensure that these initiatives are not simply read as substitutes for decriminalization, destigmatization, decarceration, or decolonization, which require a fundamental reimagining of how our societies situate sexual labor.

Similarly, advocating for indie porn can have inadvertent consequences. Now that there is widespread cultural investment in authenticity, documentation, and representations of *real sex*, indie porn risks producing formulaic and conventionalized tropes of what constitutes *real sex*, *real bodies*, or *real orgasms* in ways that audiences will recognize as authentic. The imperative to emphasize the identitarian, confessional, and personally fulfilling aspects of this work (amateur exhibitionists doing what they love) has led to dubious commercial practices among porn companies (such as staff at one Australian erotica site being expected to identify and remove what they interpreted as *fake orgasms*). Further, it has been a means by which producers can extract even more labor from performers (by expecting them to perform without remuneration) and produce greater entitlement among audiences for free content. These patterns have not emerged in a vacuum; rather they are a product of late capitalism, where the boundaries between work and identity are rapidly dissolving.

Looking to indie porn debates is therefore instructive for social movements because it allows us to move beyond regulators' preoccupations with risk and access and instead delve deeper into the politics of respectability, diversity, and reform. Listening to performers changes the political demands. For example, if we seek only better porn or rubber stamps, we are selling ourselves short. We cannot simply "add women and stir" and expect that pornography will be democratized. Tech will not save us. Indie pornographies are about more than just *good porn*. While industry-labeling mechanisms are useful for transparency, they are no substitute for workers' rights. In turn, workers' rights do not reduce the need to resist the glorification of work altogether. While diverse content is a laudable goal, it does not address the fact that content creators may be low-income individuals from marginalized communities producing content for multinational corporate platforms. The geographical dispersal of content creators from Los Angeles hubs to bedrooms throughout Romania and Colombia raises new issues about national income disparity and international trade. Because indie porn has been a means through which individuals—particularly those who have been locked out of other forms of labor—have sought to participate in a global economy, content creation can be a means of survival and mobility in a context of widespread unemployment, housing insecurity, and racialized capitalism. What is at stake, therefore, is more than simply visibility on film; it is also a reevaluation of the ways in which we stratify sex, organize labor, and distribute resources.

Whores in the Academy

I came into the world of porn at a time when Australia was experiencing unprecedented recognition of pornographic artists on the international festival circuit. In 2009 I was performing at Sexpo, the adult industry convention, alongside special guest porn stars Monica Mayhem and Sasha Grey at a special erotica film festival to fundraise for the Australian Sex Party. I was to be the party's first ever parliamentary candidate, campaigning for comprehensive sex education, a national classification scheme, and decriminalization of sex work. That same night I was approached by Feck, an alternative erotica company, and asked if I wanted to shoot for their site, Beautiful Agony, which depicted people masturbating but only captured their faces. Indie porn in Australia was buzzing—by 2015 a *Vice* magazine headline read: "Australia's Thriving Art-Porn Industry Is Run by Women" (Morgans 2015). Australian producers and performers were winning international awards, being featured in film festivals, contributing to literature, advocating through national media, and I

was joined by Christian Vega and (now multiple award-winning AVN and XBIZ star) Angela White in running for parliament as *out porn stars*.

And yet Australia was renowned for a draconian regulatory model with classification and criminal prohibitions on the production, possession, sale, and screening of explicit content. As a performer, I was interested in how the movement was prefiguring its own politics and values. I was traveling to festivals and sets across Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America, so my home country provided a unique departure point through which to compare the practices of these regions. But as a policy advisor and law graduate, I was interested in how the concerns of regulators were completely detached from these porn cultures and ethical conversations. In grasping to control something that clearly resisted regulation, regulators themselves were responding to a projected *fantasy* of how pornography is produced and consumed, one that had little to do with the realities of our lives.

The majority of books about pornography are written by people who do not make, watch, or create pornography. This need to distance oneself from pornography can be seen in the opening chapters of many popular books on the sex industry, wherein the author deliberately divorces themselves from the topic in order to appear neutral. Constance Penley (2015b) refers to this kind of tactic as the “elitist manoeuvre” used to avoid tainting one’s reputation. Porn consumers are frequently Othered in debates about pornography (McKee 2017). Legislators proclaim they do not watch pornography and are expected to resign if they do. Studying sex is often considered “dirty work” (Attwood 2010a, 178): The study of it, the doing of it, and the teaching of it attract institutional and professional risks, especially for those who deign to teach content analysis or porn literacy (McNair 2009). Some suggest that “it might be inadvisable to teach porn without tenure” (Attwood and Hunter 2009). If they’re unlucky, academics can even have their porn studies course outlines subpoenaed, as Constance Penley did during the obscenity trial *U.S. v. Stagliano* (693 F. Supp. 2d 25 [D.D.C. 2010]; see Penley 2015a).

Sex workers in academia are often seen as being too close to the subject, or biased, or are expected to identify as former or ex–sex workers in order to be heard. In her interviews with sex workers, Jennifer Heineman (2016) found that those in academia who consciously separate their erotic and intellectual work do so as a “conscious tool of navigation and survival” (5). Porn performers have spoken at universities to share their experiences of adult industry work (for example, see Maxxine and Hidalgo 2015, 279), though in some cases their events have been canceled or protested against, or faced backlash (Comella 2015, 283; Lee 2015d, 272). While the academy needs sex worker

voices, the institutional structure of publishing and teaching brings rewards for academics (career benefits, employment opportunities) but can risk and even jeopardize income and safety for sex workers (Lee and Sullivan 2016).

During the course of my research, there was an emotional toll to being a sex worker in the academy (Stardust 2020). Colleagues informed me that they had watched my porn, I shared hallways with academics who wanted my work criminalized, and one article claimed the subject of my research was “putrid” and “the promotion of a degrading subculture” that should never have received funding (Moynihan 2016). A student’s father complained to the dean of the law faculty that a porn star was teaching criminology, emailing screenshots from my personal Facebook page and prompting the university to seek legal advice on whether they could hire an *out* sex worker. But not all of my experiences were negative. The fact that I was a porn worker studying other porn workers was viewed by some as meriting recognition. My face appeared on an enlarged poster in a portrait series as part of a university campaign to display diverse thought leaders tackling inequality. An artwork of me painted by sex worker artist Nada DeCat was displayed as part of a Pride exhibition hosted in partnership by a multinational law firm and an investment banking company. On these occasions, our work was discussed alongside hors d’oeuvres and champagne and speeches about workplace diversity strategies and inclusivity benchmarks. These instances represented a different kind of risk—one of co-optation.

My candidacy—like my experience as a porn performer—was shaped by my white, cisgender, tertiary-educated, and middle-class privilege, which afforded me access to platforms and opportunities. As Robert L. Reece (2015) has argued, the “Duke University Porn Star” Belle Knox, who was outed as a porn actress while at university, was able to leverage her story, largely protected by “white, upwardly mobile feminine respectability” to become a “media darling,” but she is unlikely to have received the same reception if she was a Black woman working in porn to fund her college tuition. We ought to be suspicious that such instances are signs of danger rather than progress, where sex—but only some privileged iterations of it—becomes institutionalized. At the same time, sexual assault on campus is a national crisis; such professions as psychology, teaching, medicine, and law are excluding sex workers from admission; and course curricula (particularly in social work) often pathologize and stigmatize sex work, making it difficult for sex worker students to participate.

Among other things, then, this book seeks to expand upon the politically astute and sophisticated conversations that porn performers are already having within the industry about queer, trans, feminist, race, disability, and

resistance politics, what I refer to as the “epistemology of whores”—a unique lens through which sex workers know about the world. This is in the spirit of Jill Nagle’s edited volume *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997), in which she argues that “incorporating sex worker feminisms results in richer analyses of gender oppression” (1). In doing so I sit within a tradition of feminist inquiry that makes space for partial perspectives and situated knowledges (Haraway 2003), and I foreground the experiential knowledge of porn performers as the point of departure from which to understand broader trends in pornography regulation. My work draws from the collective knowledge and broader ongoing dialogues within porn cultures, building on sex worker research, writing, autobiography, and advocacy over the past four decades. It forms part of a new wave of sex-working researchers challenging the conventions and institutions of academia.

Porn Studies

The field of porn studies has blossomed since Linda Williams published *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989). Williams followed decades of political and cultural debates about sexual cultures, feminist representation and censorship, which heightened during the 1970s and peaked in the 1980s “sex wars” (Duggan and Hunter 2006). Throughout the 1990s, porn performers and scholars united to write about queer and feminist sexual cultures represented in hard copy magazines, cinema, and VCR porn (Gibson and Gibson 1993) and to critique the Christian right and second-wave feminists’ attempts to control women through crackdowns on the civil liberties of gay men, lesbians, and sex workers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, internet pornography brought new publication, distribution, and regulation frameworks, prompting a new focus on “netporn” (Albury 2004), which examined classification systems, labor markets, and taste cultures. More recently, porn studies scholars are asking what it means to decolonize pornography in settler colonial states (Mackay and Mackay 2020; Gregory 2017). Acceleration in the use of automation to generate, detect, and regulate pornography brings new opportunities for porn studies to explore the intersections of machine learning and sexually explicit media.

Popular culture texts about the dangers of pornography position porn as big industry and producers as a capitalistic monolith. Such “broad diagnoses of contemporary culture as pornified” (Paasonen 2011, 2) dismiss alternative pornographies as too marginal to warrant serious engagement. Their overwhelming lack of engagement with alternative and independent pornographies has been

a frequent critique, given that they “constitute a sizeable share of the market” (Weitzer 2011, 671). In anti-pornography feminisms, heterosexuality is assumed and ubiquitous: “It provides the basic framework for all pornography, even that which is produced by and for queers” (Thompson 2015, 750–51). By collapsing disparate pornographies into one monolithic category, these approaches eclipse more nuanced understandings of sexual cultures and media engagement. Instead, in this book I follow Linda Williams’s reflection that we ought to “map the remarkable decentring effects of proliferating sexual representations” (Williams 2004b, 171).

This book is thus situated within a burgeoning literature on independent pornographies. This body of work ranges from the emergence of a women’s market and consumer base (Smith 2007) to the transnationalism of feminist pornographies (Sabo 2012), the blending of sexual literacy, feminist consciousness-raising, and health promotion (Comella 2017), and the popularity of gay male pornography among women audiences (Neville 2018). Research into queer porn has emphasized its important role in eroticizing safer sex (Strub 2015) and its value in affirming and validating queer audiences who are marginalized by mainstream production (Ryberg 2015; Smith, Barker, and Attwood 2015). However, while research often focuses on the effects of porn content on consumers, less attention has been given to the specifics of production and distribution in a globalized marketplace or the strategies of independent producers.

A new generation of researchers are examining the political economy of pornography. Rachael A. Liberman’s (2015) qualitative interviews with US-based directors and performers of feminist pornography have elicited important data about labor conditions, income streams, and workplace trends. Heather Berg’s book *Porn Work* (2021) uses pornography as a vehicle to unpack the problems of work under capitalism, while Maggie MacDonald explores the organizational tactics of such free porn sites as Pornhub. In her fieldwork in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Sophie Pezzutto (2019) documents how trans porn performers have navigated and survived changes in the industry by developing “a carefully curated personal brand” (30). Paul Ryan (2019) documents how male sex workers use Amazon Wish Lists to receive gifts for online content on Instagram, and Dan Laurin (2019) has explored how direct-to-consumer platforms, such as OnlyFans, despite being hailed as saviors in a dwindling industry, actually require new forms of “subscription intimacy” and emotional labor. Conversations have now turned to whether OnlyFans—like other sharing economy moguls, such as Uber—could be categorized as an employer,

enabling sexual content creators to claim entitlements and protections (Marston 2020).

This book does not situate pornography as an inherently radical practice. It is not an uncritical celebration of sex. There are plenty of texts that cause us to reflect on the limitations of independent pornographies, mostly from scholar-activists of color, disabled people, and trans and gender-diverse folk for whom white feminist, cis-centric, and ableist visions of sexual-liberation-through-orgasm have fallen awfully short. If focused only on individual desire, preference, and choice, a pleasure agenda in and of itself will not be sufficient to destabilize the kyriarchy. However, pleasure (and pornography in particular) is a site at which we see multiple systems of domination and oppression intersect. It is, therefore, a site on which we see powerful acts of resistance. In *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (2014), Mireille Miller-Young documents how Black performers continue to fiercely fight back against poorer working conditions, lesser pay, and devaluation of their bodies. Siobhan Brooks (2010) has shown that spaces of sexual commerce—including purportedly feminist ones—often remain racially stratified. Kink spaces that profess sex-positivity can still act to reproduce racialized inequality (Weiss 2011), and performers of color are often hypersexualized and racialized as “repetitive caricatures” (Shimizu and Lee 2004, 1386). Despite this, the Black Sexual Economies Collective (Davis et al. 2019) notes that “the forces of commodification, exploitation and appropriation that render black sexualities both desirable and deviant also provide the spaces, networks, and relationships that have allowed black people to revise, recuperate, and rearticulate their sexual identities, erotic capital, and gender and sexual expressions and relations” (6). Black women navigate their role as protagonists in film by finding agency, pleasure, and desire in performance (Nash 2014), negotiating a space for power and playfulness (Cruz 2016), establishing Black-owned businesses, and pioneering better production values that could have ripple effects throughout film and media industries. Regulatory, technological, and economic environments, therefore, ought to support, build, and enhance the agency, autonomy, and power of communities of color over their own content and working environments.

A focus on diversity and inclusion alone will not necessarily lead to material changes in the conditions and lives of marginalized content creators. Trans performers have critiqued the slow inclusion of trans women into feminist pornographies (Hill-Meyer 2013), what Drew Deveaux coined the “cotton ceiling” facing trans women in lesbian pornography (Steinbock 2014), as well as the cisnormative “aesthetic-erotic hierarchy” that rewards passing and can clash

with a performer's own gender affirmation process (Pezzutto 2019, 40). As Cherie Seise (2010) argues, to posit representation as the forefront of queer politics without discussion of material inequalities promotes a narrow concept of a liberated queer sexuality. Trans porn performers have been at the forefront of changing the language of pornographic marketing, renegotiating what performers are expected to do on set, and challenging cisnormative and cissexist expectations over how performers relate to their bodies, genders, and bodily functions. The voices of trans performers must be amplified and centered to achieve meaningful industry change.

Similarly, the emphasis on visibility in independent pornographies may also have a different significance for performers with disabilities who historically have been fetishized or depicted as “freakish” (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sales, and Davies 1996; Mollow and McRuer 2012, 1). Loree Erickson's work on queercrip pornography describes how some performers (femmes and people with chronic illness, learning disabilities, or mental health disabilities) are erased and rendered invisible, while other performers live with “hypervisibility” because of their fatness, Blackness, or adaptive devices (Erickson 2015, 113). People with disabilities working in pornography continue to fight for transformation of production infrastructure to enable access and participation and against stereotypes of tragedy, curiosity, fetishization, and undesirability. For Loree, the end goal is not incorporation or even mainstreaming, but rather “transforming the way marginalized people and communities see themselves and think about themselves in order to mobilize folks to make structural and systemic change” (Erickson 2020b). There is a wealth of knowledge to be learned from queer disabled porn collectives, such as those Loree is part of, not only in terms of making pornography itself more accessible (such as with captioning and audio descriptions) but also in terms of building regulatory, technical, and economic environments that enable access to and participation in pornography on people's own terms by offering collective care and support.

As a result, this book approaches claims of revolution and democratization with caution. Despite their claimed opposition, so-called alternative pornographies sometimes have substantial overlap and entanglement with mainstream pornographic aesthetics and practices (Biasin, Maina, and Zecca 2014, 15). The borders between commercial and noncommercial are, in fact, “increasingly elastic” (Paasonen 2010, 1300). With performers and producers cutting across genres and industries, working in both independent and corporate productions, the divide between mainstream and alternative is ambiguous to say the least. A wealth of scholarship from internet studies also cautions us to be critical about claims of techno-utopianism. Digital content creators are now

engaged in new forms of affective, relational, and aspirational labor in the hope of being paid (Baym 2018; Duffy 2017). The architecture of social media requires people to edit themselves into safe-for-work, apolitical, un-opinionated, inoffensive versions of themselves (Marwick 2013, 163). Production of the “self” involves the generation of celebrity branding where intimacy is performed through “confessional culture,” memoir, and “reality” genres (Senft 2008). These economic, technical, and regulatory structures continue to fashion practices, identities, and representations of sex. As a result, as Katrien Jacobs (2014) argues, “the generic web architecture of indie pornography creates a flattening of alternative sexuality instead of fostering the potential for creative rebellion” (127). In this book I argue that we ought to think about democratization of pornography not only in terms of the decentralization of production and distribution but also in terms of the redistribution of material wealth, ownership of infrastructure, and access to decision-making power.

Made up of four parts, *Indie Porn* moves through the aspirations, strategies, and tensions of the movement as it interacts with legal, economic, and technical obstacles. Part I, “Porn Cultures,” documents the pioneering interventions and provocations of this social movement as it moves beyond inclusion and diversity and toward demands for collective ownership, labor rights, and distributed wealth. Part II, “Regulatory Fantasies,” charts the frameworks of risk, harm, and offensiveness that have made their way from historical obscenity legislation into classification laws and through to new forms of online content moderation. Part III, “The Hustle,” documents the tactics and strategies of indie porn to survive this climate, including the mobilization of authenticity narratives and building a base of ethical consumers. Part IV, “Tensions,” draws out the risks of employing respectability politics, the problematic distinction between good and bad pornography, and the pitfalls of engaging in porn law reform. Finally, the book concludes by gesturing to the role of carceral surveillance in regulating pornographies and offering a glimpse of the innovative, world-building, and artistic projects sex workers are leading in the tech field. It calls for a coalitional politics between social movements for lasting social change.

Auto-pornographic Ethnography

I began research for this book in 2012. At the time, I was part of a documentary titled *Independent Pornography in Australia* by Sensate Films, which showcased key issues affecting Australian indie porn producers. I used themes from this documentary—including infrastructure, criminalization, isolation,

and ethics—as a starting point to develop a methodology to further explore how porn regulation affected my communities. In consultation with Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association (the national peak body representing sex workers), Eros Association (the national body representing adult businesses), and speakers on the 2013 feminist porn panel at the Perv Queerotic Film Festival, I developed research questions that would elicit knowledge useful to both producers and performers. While much research on pornography is concerned with consumption, I chose to focus on labor. I took a four-pronged approach involving qualitative interviews with Australian porn performers, producers, and stakeholders to speak back to legal and policy frameworks: auto-ethnography (performing in and producing pornography) to enrich the interviews; a legislative and case law review to understand the overarching regulatory climate; and archival research to provide the historical context. Throughout the project I engaged in consultation with Scarlet Alliance and my participants, from designing questions and methodology to coding, analysis, and reporting.

In 2015–16 I conducted sixty-to-ninety-minute qualitative interviews with thirty-five porn producers, performers, classification stakeholders, community organizers, and academics. Twenty of the interviews were with porn producers of various sizes and scales, sixteen of whom (80 percent) were also performers, appearing either in film, photography, or print. Of the sixteen performer-producers, eleven operated as solo producers, four operated in a two-person partnership, and one was a feature director for a company. Most of the sole-trader, performer-producers running their own sites and projects were cisgender queer women, nonbinary people, trans men, and queer men. They were eligible to participate if they identified themselves and/or their work as queer, feminist, ethical, alternative, or kinky. Because my project was framed as being about pornography rather than online sex work, many of the participants who self-selected were represented on the international porn film festival circuit and had sufficient class and white privilege to be publicly out. In solidarity with sex worker guidelines on ethical research, I paid porn performers an honorarium of \$150 for their involvement to value their time, knowledge, and expertise. The costs were partially funded by a faculty grant and partially self-funded by my own sex work.

In addition to producers, I interviewed spokespeople from four organizational bodies: Scarlet Alliance, Eros Association, Electronic Frontiers Australia (a nonprofit digital rights organization), and the Australian Queer Archives (the biggest repository of historical materials about LGBTQ+SB experience in Australia). These bodies offered historical contexts on political strategies for sex

worker rights, lobbying campaigns to legalize the sale of adult films, government attempts to filter and regulate the internet, and print/performance cultures of queer sexual representation.

I further interviewed six classification stakeholders: ACON's (formerly the AIDS Council of NSW) sexual health project for kinky and sexually adventurous women, which ran from 2012 to 2018 and used sexual imagery for health promotion; *Archer* magazine, a print publication about sexuality, gender, and identity established in 2013 (its second issue was removed from newsagent shelves because it was deemed "inappropriate for sale"); *Dirty Queer*, a queer print magazine featuring photographs and articles between 2010 and 2016; Melbourne Queer Film Festival, the largest and oldest queer film festival in Australia; Tilde, the Melbourne Trans and Gender Diverse Film Festival, which launched in 2014; and an anonymous queer porn film festival established in 2009 that screened sexually themed films alongside panels and workshops. These stakeholders all used sexual content for the purposes of community building, health promotion, and subcultural formation and were subject to classification and criminal laws. Finally, in order to explore different conceptual approaches to sex, pleasure, and regulation, I interviewed five Australian academics with expertise in pornography, classification, and media.

While my insider positionality allowed for access, it did not follow that the experience of porn production in Australia was identical. My participants and I shared some common experiences of stigma and discrimination by virtue of producing in a criminal environment that necessitated being attuned to risks of identification from law enforcement, all resulting in anxiety and uncertainty. However, people's risks and abilities to comply differed depending on the size of their business, amount of capital, citizenship status, gender, class, ethnicity, and HIV status. As such, in *Indie Porn* I take a peer approach in the spirit of "nothing about us without us" but with the caveat that "us" is actually a heterogeneous alliance, often characterized by divergent experiences, investments, and stakes. I see indie porn producers not as a homogenous, collapsible group, but as folks who have come together in the spirit of finding affinities and solidarities for the purpose of political struggle.

I was interested in building community through the research. During the project, participants often wrote to me asking for clarification about the legal framework, for academic references for articles they were writing, or to proofread their work. I assisted one participant in writing her first individual submission to a senate inquiry on porn law reform. I took a feminist approach in approaching interviews as a two-way conversation rather than as a data-extraction exercise, offering my own experiences in an effort to share

something personal and inviting feedback on my interpretations. Because of the risk of incrimination, participants could opt to be identified by pseudonyms, to edit their transcripts, and to review draft chapters for accuracy, confidentiality, and context. However, some made the political choice to be identifiable—Angela White, for example, deliberately uses her legal name in pornography to reject shame and stigma. In the write-up, I took an affirmative action approach that prioritized the voices and experiences of performers over producers in order to lessen the potential for the research to become a marketing or public relations exercise and to give performers a chance to speak back about their on-set experiences.

I supplemented this interview data with a legal and archival review, sitting in my kitchen wading through folders of state and federal classification and criminal legislation and case law to understand systems of content regulation and how they had been used to prosecute both producers and retailers. I flew to Flinders University in Adelaide to visit the Eros Foundation Archives and trawled through decades of correspondence, campaigns, parliamentary records, explanatory memoranda, bills, and Hansard to understand the political milieu in which these laws originally developed. I rummaged through flyers, magazines, and gay newspapers at the Australian Queer Archives in Melbourne, where I found local community porn projects and periodicals dating back to the 1970s. I traveled to Canberra, home of Australia's Parliament and known as the country's capital of porn and pyrotechnics, to visit the *X-Rated: Sex Industry in the ACT* exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, which featured newspaper clippings, posters, lobbying letters, vintage model releases, and home-made amateur porn from the 1980s. These materials allowed me to understand the regulatory clashes, media environment, and distribution challenges of indie pornographers in historical context.

Because I conducted my interviews before the widespread proliferation of platformed sex work (and the market dominance of OnlyFans) and before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this book offers insights into how the gig economy has transformed the indie porn landscape. I compare my participants' experiences with data from my recent projects and collaborations. These include quotes from the multi-stakeholder workshop "Gendered Online Harm," which I ran with colleagues at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making in 2021; findings from a qualitative project I undertook on platform cooperatives and alternative governance models for sexual content moderation in 2023; and collaborative research I undertook with colleagues at the New York-based activist collectives Hacking//Hustling and Decoding Stigma between 2020 and 2022, during and following

my fellowship at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. As a result, the book moves through several significant industry and technological moments over the past decade. Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the core issues facing indie performers remain the same.

Porn was not abstract for me—I was in it. Over the course of my career, I performed with erotica companies, independent producers, and individual sex workers. We created products that were sold on platforms and DVDs, licensed to overseas sites, and screened at film festivals. I performed both in Australia and internationally, including shooting scenes with performers from Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and London. I won awards for both porn performance and production and screened films at festivals across North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe. During this time, I collaborated on art projects related to pornography, including photo essays for queer women's health promotion (top ten tips for G-spot ejaculation!), a durational window display (to protest the gentrification of sex industry spaces), artist panels, and live demonstration sex education workshops in Toronto, Amsterdam, and Berlin. I wrote for industry journals, adult magazines, anthologies, sex advice columns, parliamentary inquiries, and legal working groups; hosted international porn performers and directors when they came to Australia; shared advice, skills, and tips with other producers; and had hundreds of informal, on-the-job, behind-the-scenes conversations about porn, work, and the future.

In *Indie Porn* I speak as someone intimately involved in indie, queer, feminist, and ethical porn movements, not only as a writer and academic but primarily as a queer femme, producer, and sex worker. My foray into the industry began as a stripper in the “red light” district of Kings Cross in Sydney. For around fifteen years I worked across clubs, hotels, garages, stages, expos, magazines, brothels, dungeons, and people's living rooms, performing a range of services from blow jobs, massages, lap dances, stage shows, centerfolds, and BDSM to what some customers called “adult Cirque du Soleil.” As such, I am part of this movement, beyond the confines of the research, and share responsibility for how we have navigated regulation, marketed our work, presented our stories, and used space we were afforded along with the gaps we have inevitably left and mistakes we have made. Rather than being a detached or neutral observer, auto-ethnography allowed me to situate my personal, individual, and local experiences within broader cultural, social, and structural frameworks.

I call my approach *auto-pornographic ethnography*. In doing so, I draw upon Jennifer Heineman's (2016) approach of using ethnography to build a “more holistic, fleshy, and compelling examination” (38) and Kristen C. Blinne's

FIGURE I.1. The author's former subscription website. Flyer by Luna Trash. Original photographs by Ryan Ambrose, Adam Jay, and Richard Arthur.



(2012) “auto-erotic ethnography” of masturbation, the latter inspired by Ken Plummer’s (1995) work on the power of telling sexual stories and Audre Lorde’s ([1978] 1997) work on the erotic potential. Because my writing is less about sexual pleasure and more about sexual labor, I extend Blinne’s concept with reference to Paul Preciado’s (2013) concept of the “autopornographic body” (38), a term he uses to describe individuals who produce their sexual selves in an online commercial sex market. For me, auto-pornographic ethnography

involves the process of how we fashion and produce ourselves for sexual commerce. Offering up excerpts from behind-the-scenes is my attempt to deconstruct a naturalized sexuality and explore how the pornographic self is manufactured. In this sense, pornography is not so different from other forms of social media production. The practice for me was, in fact, quite ordinary, and my intention was to bring readers beyond the hype to engage with pornography in a more quotidian manner. My “field notes” are scattered throughout as a series of vignettes, small peepholes into my life on set, at festivals, in forums, and behind-the-scenes, spanning a period of over ten years. I offer these first-person stories in the spirit of connection, to invite you into the pornographic set so that you can experience it *with* me, with the hope that it will lead to new ways of understanding the bodily labors of pornography.