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Articulations of Power Presentation: Violence and subjectivity in anti-pornography
feminist group-making projects

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**BREAKING POINTS: WOMEN, SEXUALITY, PORNOGRAPHY AND THE VICISSITUDES
OF FEMINIST GROUP-MAKING PROJECTS, 1970-1986.**

Chapter 1: Introduction

The act of definition—especially self-definition—is thus paramount to the work of social movements. To transform social relations, it becomes necessary to define them in a way that accurately reflects the positions and desires of the ground for which the transformation is to occur. The act of definition, then, requires the creation of a group itself — in other words, the creation of a new and meaningful identity.¹

—Catriona Sandilands

On October 20th, 1979 more than 5,000 feminists, college students, and activists marched through New York City’s Times Square district, protesting 42nd Street’s lascivious sex shops, peep shows and X-rated movie theatres, all named through the umbrella term “pornography.” Protesters held signs reading, “Porn hurts women” and “Pornography is a feminist issue.” They chanted phrases such as “Clean it up, shut it down, make New York a safer town” and “Two, four, six, eight, pornography is woman-hate.” Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, and Susan Brownmiller, all prominent feminists who had been active from early on in the women’s movement, fronted the march, holding a banner that succinctly summarized their anti-porn stance: “Women Against Pornography. Stop Violence Against Women.” The three were also founding members of the New York City-based group Women Against Pornography (WAP), which was involved in organizing the protest.² WAP had made Times Square area their ground zero of

¹ Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37.

² Barbara Basler, "5,000 Join Feminist Group's Rally In Times Sq. Against Pornography," *New York Times*, October 21st, 1979: 41.

organizing, leading weekly tours of the area and strategically locating their office on nearby Ninth Avenue.

The protest featured many tropes common to popular activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the size of the rally, its visibility, and ostensibly unified agenda. On the ground, feminists explained their oppositions to porn *as women*. For instance, one protestor would claim, “Pornography merchants have lied about all of us, libeled and defamed all of us and given us cause to fight them together.” The categorical invocation of “us” and “all,” by the protestor implied that women shared similar viewpoints about the part that male-created, sexually explicit representation played in women’s overall oppression in society. This assumption was a central feature of anti-pornography intellectual discourse from the mid-1970s-onward. These writings consistently claimed that *all* women, regardless of social location, were oppressed by the existence of pornography.

The protestor’s utterance of “us” and “all,” referring to “all women” are examples of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls a “performative discourse.” For Bourdieu, an especially potent moment of social struggle is the “public act of naming” that occurs during demonstrations — e.g. “Pornography merchants have... given us cause to fight them together” — for this is when “the practical group — virtual, ignored, denied, or repressed — makes itself visible and manifest, for other groups and *for itself*, and attests to its existence as a group that is known and recognized.”³ Those involved in social struggle seek to impose, “a new vision and a new division on the social world” that establishes “meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and the

³ Ibid., 224; emphasis in original.

unity of the group.”⁴ The Times Square protest was precisely this form of group-making project: “women” constituting themselves as a group entity with shared interests against “pornography,” the genre.

Bourdieu reminds us that the “effectiveness of... performative discourse... is directly proportional to the authority of the person doing the asserting.”⁵ Earlier in the year, WAP had begun to receive significant notice in the mainstream media, notably the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. The latter publication had covered burgeoning anti-pornography activism earlier in the summer, describing the Times Square area as part-and-parcel to women’s “all-out war against pornography.”⁶ The October 1979 protest marked the group’s biggest, and most highly visible anti-pornography organizing to date. Steinem, Abzug and Brownmiller’s literal fronting of the march with a banner was not only indicative of the ideological sway they held over the group of protestors, it is also a reminder that groups are created by the individuals who impose the “common principles of vision and division” upon them, principles that ultimately provide “a unique vision of [the group’s] identity.”⁷ The banner’s abridged message became the unaltered anti-pornography feminist orthodoxy over the next decade.

However, cracks in the veneer of feminist unity were also evident during the event. For instance, the *Times* quoted a female anti-pornography protestor who said, “There are a lot of feminist issues I would not agree with — I am against abortion, for

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “Identity and Representation: Elements for a Critical Reflection on the Idea of Region,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 221-224.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶ Georgia Dullea, “In Feminists’ Antipornography Drive, 42nd Street Is the Target,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1979: A12; *Time*, “Women’s War on Porn,” August 27, 1979.

⁷ Bourdieu, 224.

example — but this anti-pornography move I fully support.” Another group of protestors representing an organization called the Morality Action Committee attempted to join the march, bearing signs that read, “protect our children.” While the group denied affiliation with anti-homosexual crusader Anita Bryant (with whom the phrase had been associated), anti-pornography feminism’s ideological overlap with other conservative anti-pornography campaigns of the era made such confrontations inevitable. For example, another protestor showed up at the protest holding up an anti-abortion, anti-homosexual poster.⁸

The feminists’ Times Square struggle was also enmeshed in the real estate politics being pushed forth by the New York City government. WAP’s office was leased free of charge from the 42nd Street Redevelopment Corporation, a nonprofit that received funds from the Ford Foundation and sought urban renewal in the district. A *New York Times* article revealed that the office had been previously, “a soul food restaurant and gathering place for transvestites and prostitutes.” The piece also quoted Carl Weisbrod, a lawyer for the city’s Midtown Enforcement Project: “our means and ends may not be exactly the same... [but] obviously, the issue of pornography is a matter of concern to both the city and the feminists’ ...[and] the city needed all the help it could get on this score.”⁹ Despite this, feminists’ role in “cleaning up” the area may have been more symbolic than actual; a newspaper article published a month after the October protest revealed a long-term

⁸ Basler, 41.

⁹ Dullea, A12.

decline in sex-related businesses over a five-year period, well before WAP had arrived there.¹⁰

Group-making projects and categories for doing

This paper interprets anti-pornography feminism and the ensuing conflicts over sexuality and pornography as central to feminist group-making projects in the 1970s and 1980s. My writing specifically addresses how “*women*” as a social category precipitated both the group-making and breaking points of feminism during the sex and pornography debates. Through an exploration of the intellectual texts of the era (essays, books, newspaper articles, conferences, protests), I argue that fractures in feminism appear when radically divergent viewpoints and interests are represented by the considerably generic terms “feminist,” “feminism,” “women,” and “men.” By the mid-1980s these vicissitudes had so thoroughly polarized the feminists that the possibility of a broad based movement ceased to exist — or at least one whose group making power rested upon issues of sex and sexuality.

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By the mid-1970s, feminists had already developed substantial theories that addressed women’s subordinate role in contemporary society. These theories spanned grassroots publications such as newspapers and magazines, women’s studies programs that galvanized academic feminism, and bestselling books such as Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970). Anti-pornography feminist arguments were particularly influenced by views that asserted “women” were an

¹⁰ Carter B. Horsley, "The 'Porn Thorn' in Midtown's Side Gets Less Painful," *New York Times*, November 18, 1979, R1. For more about Times Square during the “golden age” of pornography, see Josh Alan Friedman, *Tales of Times Square*, Expanded Edition (Portland, Oregon: Feral House, 1993).

objective class of individuals unanimously oppressed by another, also-homogenous group: “men.” For instance, in 1969, Gayle Rubin (who later would emerge as a prominent figure in feminist sex radicalism) argued, “the basic premise of women’s liberation is that women are an exploited class... Women form a class within every class. Sometimes they are oppressed despite their class.”¹¹

However, positing “women” and “men” as the fundamental protagonists of social life meant emphasizing symbolic group membership at the behest of other forms of privilege — social, culture, and economic — that individual women held. Political scientist Judith Grant argues that this abstraction of women above social reality meant “feminists could point to no theory that proved that women as women were in an objectively oppressed situation.” To rectify this problem, feminists defined oppression subjectively, drawing from notions of women’s experience to unite them “through what ... was assumed would be their common feelings about oppression.” An example of this comes from the writing of the Radicallesbians, who claimed “to confront another woman is finally to confront one’s self—the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid.” Grant notes this particular construction of experience “made it theoretically difficult, if not impossible to discount the opinions and/or actions of any given woman.” Conversely, white middle-to-upper class women drew “from their own particular experiences to arrive at the experiences of women in general” to analyze political problems, effectively silencing the viewpoints of minority and/or lower class women.¹²

¹¹ Gayle Rubin, “Woman as Nigger,” in *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women*, ed. Betty Roszak and Theodore Roszak (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 231

¹² Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 30-31; emphasis in original; Radicallesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” in

“Violence” and “experience”: pornography and the oppression of women.

Much as early feminists relied on subjective female “experience,” to substantiate their claims of women oppressed *as women*, anti-pornography feminists used a subjective construction of “violence” to prove that pornography universally harmed women. These arguments had a common sense appeal: by consistently emphasizing images of men dominating women, anti-pornography feminists argued that pornography was a representational medium reflective of the actual position that women held in society. These images of male dominance were also assumed to be produced under *conditions* of male dominance and thus incitement to further male dominance. Each step in this process reciprocally reinforced the other to create and recreate the overall condition of oppression for women as a group.

However, because these arguments could not be empirically proven — after all, not every “pornographic” image was produced under dominant conditions — anti-pornography feminists were faced with a weak case against pornography. Yet rather than often a more nuanced look at the medium, they subjectively defined dominance through a more pointed synonym: “violence.”

“Violence,” appears in anti-pornography discourse as a perpetual changeling: symbolic, actual, conditional, or causal, and occasionally all at once. An oft-quoted 1974 essay by Robin Morgan was an early example of this mixed analysis. While both proponents and problematizers of anti-porn feminism would soon latch onto her catchphrase, “Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice,” the essay also

proliferated a nebulous view of female consent that loosened the definition of what constituted a rape. For instance, she argued that a rape occurred “any time sexual intercourse... has not been *initiated* by the woman, out of her own genuine affection and desire.” Foreclosing any possibility that men at least might be able to initiate sex *consensually*, Morgan went further, suggesting that even women who voluntarily initiate sex could be raped: “We also know that many women, in responding to this pressure to be ‘liberated initiators’ have done so *not* out of their own desire but for the same old reasons—fear of losing the guy, fear of being a prude, fear of hurting his feelings, *fear*.” Shere Hite’s popular *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study on Female Sexuality* (1976) would confirm some of Morgan’s assertions. Many heterosexual women interviewed reported they could not say no to sex; Hite also pointed out that many of these women understood male sexuality in terms of an uncontrollable and incessant “sex drive.” However, rather than expose this myth, Morgan’s essay reinforced it, insisting that “the act of rape is merely the expression of the standard, “healthy,” even encouraged male fantasy in patriarchal culture—that of aggressive sex.” She opposed her view of “genuine affection and desire” with “aggressive sex,” creating a notion of consent grounded in sexual aesthetics that could be read as specifically male or female. Yet the “genuine” female desire that Morgan refers to is not grounded in a workable, transposable form of consent such as a verbal “Yes.” The closest thing she describes as “genuine” desire is her observation that, “for most women *Wuthering Heights* is still a *real* turn-on.” This *Wuthering Heights*-ification of female desire and consent leaves “pornography” in place as the de facto, negative reversal; the not-genuine male rapist imitation of women’s sexuality.¹³

¹³ Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Going Too Far: The Personal*

Other essays such as Morgan's were thick on rhetoric but short on examples or empirical evidence. For instance, Diana E.H. Russell, writing in 1977 for the Los Angeles-based feminist publication *Chrysalis*, held up the 1976 B-horror film "Snuff" as a lone exception to the fact that "feminists have chosen to ignore the degrading nature of pornography." However, "degrading pornography," was broadly defined: "Snuff" featured little sexually explicit imagery, but was objectionable to many feminists because it purported to feature the actual filmed murder of a woman. "Snuff," was linked a series of titles that Russell offered up as pornography — "Lesson in Pain," "Slave Girl," "Golden Pain," "Club Brute Force" — sans content analysis or bibliography. When titles and images were all that it took to make a case of violence against women, this often led anti-porn feminists into rampant free association. For example, Andrea Dworkin's 1978 speech "Pornography and Grief," made reference to the cover of the Erotic Drum Band album "Plug Me to Death." The title is what she finds objectionable, but she also refers to the album cover — which featured a soft-focus, non-explicit image of a woman's legs — as "pornography," asserting that, "The psychic violence in pornography is unbearable in and of itself. It acts on one like a bludgeon until one's sensibility is pummeled flat and one's heart goes dead." Her performative juxtaposition of "women," with "our" "us" and "one" reinforces the idea that all women's response to pornography is inevitable, uniform and inherently victimizing.¹⁴

Chronicle of a Feminist (New York: Random House, 1978), 169, 165; emphasis in original, 166-167; Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 460-468.

¹⁴ Diana E.H. Russell, "On Pornography," *Chrysalis*, no. 4 (1977): 11; Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 290, 287.

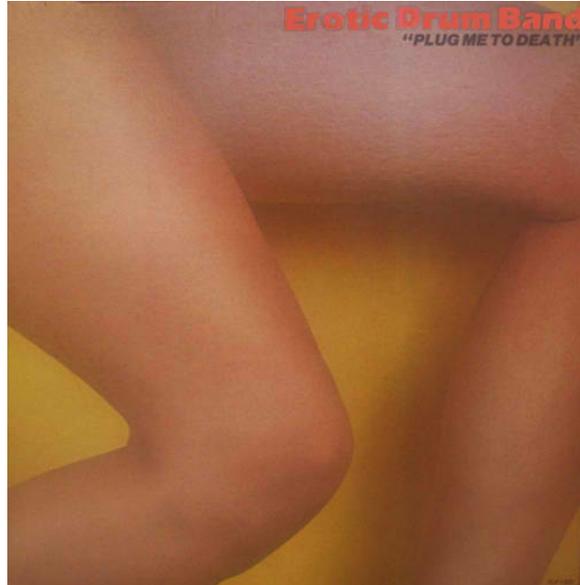


Figure 1: The cover of the Erotic Drum Band's album "Plug Me to Death" (1978). Andrea Dworkin used this image to argue, "The psychic violence in pornography is unbearable in and of itself. It acts on one like a bludgeon until one's sensibility is pummeled flat and one's heart goes dead."

Feminists' case against pornography was also ensured through how they defined it, using singular meanings and incendiary and provocative phrases such as Morgan's "Porography is the theory and rape is the practice." As Andrea Dworkin commented in the same speech, "The eroticization of murder is the essence of pornography." Russell's essay "On Pornography" blankly asserted, "Domination and torture are what it is about." Kathleen Berry's book *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979) described pornography as "the principle medium through which cultural sadism becomes part of the practice of individuals." This "practice" necessarily victimized women *as women*: "Against no other group in society could handbooks or blueprints for sadistic violence, mutilation and even gynocide abound with such safety, support, and impunity." These definitions allowed

material that was arguably nonviolent (as was the case with the “Plug Me to Death” album cover) or nonsexual to be re-codified as pornography.¹⁵

This also allowed Russell to make observations such as, “Some pornography I saw doesn’t even involve sex: Women are kidnapped, beaten, tied up, then hung like pieces of meat.” Here, pornography would appear to be violence without sex. However later in her essay, she would acknowledge that, “pornography often does not involve explicit violence against women.” Russell’s second observation apparently means that pornography is violence without *violence*. In a Q&A section published in the November 1977 Women Against Violence in Media and Pornography (WAVPM) newsletter, Russell was asked, “Do you object to pornography in which there is no violence?” she responded, “Yes. Not all pornography is violence, but even the most banal pornography objectifies women’s bodies.” She continued along a slippery slope, arguing that objectification “means that women are not seen as human beings but as things. Men are reared to view females in this way, pornography thrives off this and feeds it, and rape is one of the consequences.” Here, the definitional cul-de-sac is complete: representation itself is violence because it leads to objectification that leads to violence.

If anything violent could potentially be analyzed as pornography, and everything pornographic could be viewed as violence, this was limitlessly productive for feminists, who could find examples of the genre in an ever-expanding manner. By defining pornography in this way, feminists such as Dworkin, Russell and Barry obviated important questions about the differences between representation and reality and the

¹⁵ Andrea Dworkin, “Pornography and Grief,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 288; Russell, “On Pornography,” 12; Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 206, 205.

context and meaning of social texts. For instance, can images be read with any sense of definitive meaning? Does knowledge of the conditions under which an image has been produced precipitate any change in the nature of its meaning? Are there any portrayals of sexism or violence (in cinema, for instance) that might have an educative purpose? What is the difference between violence(s), sensationalist imagery and sexist imagery? And so on...

Anti-pornography feminists answered none of these questions, and instead continued to cast a wider and wider net of images and occasionally literature they analyzed as unequivocally pornographic. This was the linchpin of anti-porn feminist strategy. Pornography, as representation of violence against women, and violence itself, was a *functional* symbolic trope, significantly aiding feminists' group-making projects in the midst of a larger political shift toward conservatism. Deconstructing the roots of their own provocative and often-incendiary rhetoric would have meant depriving themselves of what was becoming their only tool of public visibility in an increasingly dreary political moment.¹⁶

¹⁶ Russell, "On Pornography," 12, 14; Diana E.H. Russell and Laura Lederer, "Questions We Get Asked Most Often," in *Take Back the Night: Women On Pornography* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 24; Gloria Steinem, "Pornography — Not Sex But the Obscene Use of Power," *Ms. Magazine*, August 1977: 43-44.