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the Real (Porn) World

THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF THE NEW REALITY PORN

by Jennifer Moorman

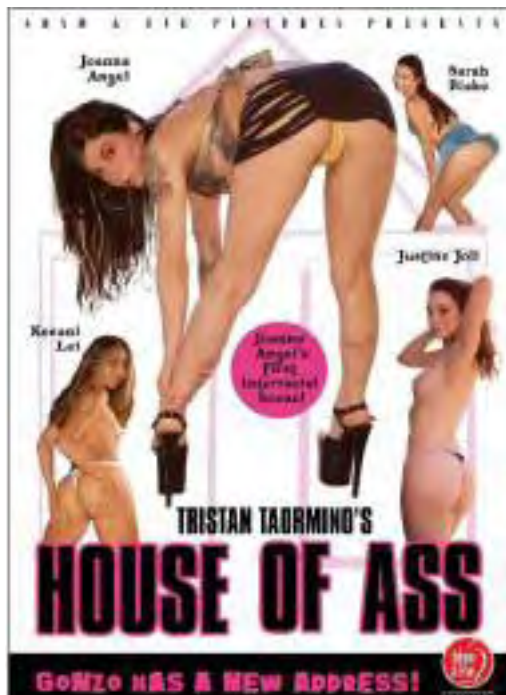
It may at first seem perfectly self-evident that a porn filmmaker would want to borrow from the conventions of reality TV. Cinematic pornography has, as Linda Williams suggests, concerned itself with proving its own authenticity since its inception.¹ And reality TV attempts to depict “the real world,” right? In fact, generally speaking, it doesn’t. A closer look at reality TV reveals its patently “false settings [and] contrived situations,” and we should not make the mistake of assuming that its audience is not happily aware of this.² Although the genre has arguably been around at least since the 1973 televising of *An American Family* on PBS, MTV’s *The Real World* is generally credited with having ushered in the era marked by its current incarnation. The genre has progressed quite a bit since and has

become increasingly self-conscious, a fact that is not lost on its fans. As Jeffrey Sconce puts it, the “‘reality’ in reality TV is merely one of many fluid plot conventions and not an inviolable foundation.”³

So why would a filmmaker—a feminist, openly queer, highly media-literate columnist for the *Village Voice* who claims to be depicting sex as it really is (at least, as it really is among porn stars)—utilize conventions that at once signal “reality” and acknowledge the quotes around it? In *House of Ass* (2005) and *Chemistry Vol. 1* (2006), Tristan Taormino does just that; she claims to depict “real” sex, that is, the sex porn stars have when the cameras aren’t rolling.⁴ And yet the cameras unmistakably are rolling, and various aspects of the texts and extratextual materials like DVD covers, bonus footage, and deleted scenes,

openly belie these claims for authenticity. I would argue that the films’ polyvalent discourse allows for them at once to criticize the porn genre’s obsession with the “real” and to participate in this obsession.

Furthermore, it allows for a manifestly critical reflection on the politics of racialized and sexualized representation in a notoriously uncritical, unreflective genre. There are many examples of blatantly campy porn in which the actors and filmmakers are clearly aware of the ridiculousness of their narratives and the implausibility of their dialogue. Constance Penley argues that most pornography involves a fair amount of humor, and certainly this humor is often directed towards itself.⁵ Critical reflection, however, is decidedly rare and, for the most part, avoided at all costs—porn does not want its viewers to engage in the sort of



House of Ass, Tristan Taormino, Smart Ass Productions, 2005

mental exercise that could inhibit the desired physical responses.

House of Ass and, to a far greater extent, *Chemistry* therefore stand out as curious examples of porn that is clearly designed to elicit both a physical and an intellectual response, a feat enabled by the conventions of reality TV. Shows like *The Real World* portray themselves as both unabashedly sensationalistic entertainment and a liberal venue for the examination of racial and sexual politics in US society. Taormino seems to have followed in these shows' footsteps in creating two adult videos that flagrantly appeal to viewers' prurient interest, even as they appear to open up a space for the investigation of racial and sexual representation in mainstream pornographic cinema.⁶ I would like to consider the extent to which either of these texts succeeds in its examination of race and gender and genuinely presents a challenge to prejudices and stereotypes, and the extent to which either of these texts can be read as queer.

Both *House of Ass* and *Chemistry* have explicitly fashioned themselves after MTV's ongoing reality series *The Real World*, first aired in 1992. As such, it is worth reviewing the series' conventions and claims for social relevance. Jon Kraszewski suggests that "although not scripted, the show actively constructs what reality and racism are for its audience through a variety of production

practices."⁷ These practices include, but are not limited to, the producers' casting decisions, choices regarding where and what to film, and the construction of narrative storylines through editing.

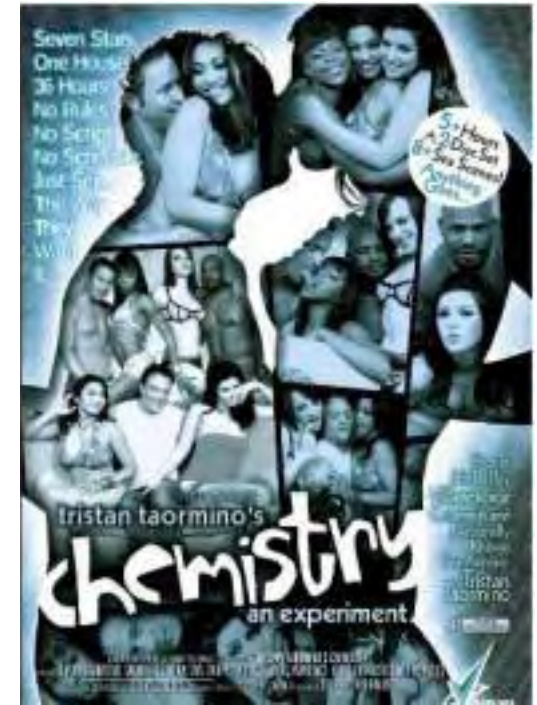
In the first season of *The Real World*, for instance, the producers chose to put the "seven strangers" in a New York City loft and to edit the show in such a way as to focus largely on the budding friendship between white yokel Julie from rural Alabama, who initially expresses racist assumptions, and black professional rapper Heather, who had already been living in NYC prior to the show's casting. The discourse of liberalism that informs the show enables it to pat itself on the back for its willingness to deal with the inflammatory subject of race relations in the US, even as it does not so much examine the issue as naively equate urbanity with an enlightened perspective. The show essentially suggests that racism can be solved if roommates can challenge the prejudices of rural conservatives and make them aware of their own ignorance. This awareness constitutes only one step along the way to an individual's awareness of and resistance to his or her own internalized prejudices, let alone a solution to the widespread, pervasive, systemic, institutionally encoded, and often relatively subtle racism that operates continually in the US; for *The Real World*, however, it's enough.

The show certainly makes its claims for the depiction of “reality,” but for my purposes, it is not so much any given show’s level of self-consciousness (or lack thereof) that matters, as it is a general cultural recognition of the machinations behind reality TV programming. For instance, as Jeff Sconce argues, “When the ‘news’ broke that producers of *Survivor* had staged certain events more than once . . . the public could have cared less” (Sconce 263). In other words, whether or not producers realize it, audiences have become increasingly cynical about, and increasingly aware of, the highly manipulated nature of reality TV. The pleasures to be derived from viewing reality TV have less to do with the belief that one is experiencing unmediated reality than with the joys of submitting to generic conventions; Sconce again suggests that “the promise of the real on these programs (or in these people)—however distant, strained, and artificial—enables forms of textual play like those unique to any genre” (Sconce 262).

With *House of Ass* we get a taste of the drama and discord that we’ve come to expect from shows like *The Real World*, but it seems remarkably out of place in a porno movie. In any case, the one moment of actual “drama” occurs off the screen. Apparently two of the cast members, a real-life couple, had a falling out over the fact that she (Jezebel) would not give him (Justin) a blow job, and left early

in the morning before anyone else had gotten out of bed. Justin left a note for Tristan, apologizing and explaining that his relationship with Jezebel had “reached an impasse.” It seems an odd drama to manufacture, if indeed Taormino did, since none of the remaining cast members particularly cares that they’ve left; yet, it is the only aspect of the video that actually resembles reality programming. The rest of the video is equally disjointed and amateurish, and in no way makes good on Taormino’s claims to making feminist porn.

Taormino explains, with regard to her theory of feminist porn, solidified during the making of the filmed version of *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, that she believes “it is possible to create sexual images without stripping away someone’s entire identity” (Milne 95). This notion is doubtless the motivating force behind her use of the reality TV convention of the “confessional” in both *House of Ass* and *Chemistry*. But whereas *Chemistry* would employ this strategy in such a way as to genuinely convey something of the subjectivity of each of the performers and to challenge dominant sexual paradigms both within the industry and within American society at large, *House of Ass* uses it inconsistently, superficially, and—for the most part—incoherently. This is the format through which she examines the phenomenon that is prominently emblazoned on the front cover of the DVD and reiter-



Chemistry, Vol. 1, Tristan Taormino, Smart Ass Productions, 2006

ated on the back: “Joanna Angel’s first interracial scene!” Angel, who is white, neglects to problematize the fact that in her first scene she is made to have sex with the man who deemed “eating pussy . . . a waste of time,” but she hesitates in coupling with Mr. Marcus, who has a reputation for being a considerate lover, simply because he is a black man. In the confessional in which she talks about her scene with Mr. Marcus, she describes how she responded to a questionnaire (apparently conducted verbally by a member of the video’s crew prior to filming) by saying that she does anal, she swallows (semen), but that she does not do interracial scenes. She explains:

I don’t want to, like, do anything on camera that I haven’t, like, already done in my real life first, because, like, I think it would look really weird, or something . . . Does that make me racist? That I would let some white stranger, like, cum all over my face, but not a black one?

Yes, Joanna, I believe it does. The fact that she is able to acknowledge this, and that she is then able to do the scene with Mr. Marcus—because they had “chemistry”—does not make her significantly less racist or the video significantly more progressive than any other in which racial difference is fetishized. In no way am I suggesting that difference ought to be collapsed or elided or that we live in a “color-blind” society, but there is a considerable disparity between acknowledging or question-

ing difference and equating a person—indeed, an entire race of persons—with a sex act.

It is doubtless important to bring to light, as her confessional does, the sort of prejudices that operate in the industry and seriously impact casting decisions, among other things. The movie does not, however, go beyond this acknowledgement to challenge what I would call, following Stuart Hall, the “inferential” racism⁸ inherent in Angel’s statement and in the idea that runs unchecked throughout both Taormino’s videos and the industry at large, that only sex between a black person and a white person should be described as “interracial.” The marketing decision to capitalize on the sort of sensationalism that the inclusion of Angel’s remarks seems designed to question is mystifying, unless it constitutes the sort of concession to industry pressure that may become unnecessary as her porn gains a significant audience. Regardless, for most viewers, the framing of the issue on the DVD cover provides the context in which Angel’s remarks will be taken. Even if the context created thereby was not so luridly exploitative of racial difference, any true examination of racial politics in adult video would have to move beyond the discourse that merely recognizes the existence of them.

Fortunately, nearly everything about *Chemistry Vol. 1* constitutes an improvement over

House of Ass and indicates that Taormino is in fact capable of making the kind of politically motivated porn that, until the video’s release in late 2006, she had only talked about. Even before watching the videos, the DVD packaging illustrates the differences in tone: whereas the DVD cover art for *House of Ass* is blatantly exploitative—on the front, three of the women bend over and bare their asses for the camera, and on the back is emblazoned the line, “see what happens when people stop getting polite, and start getting naked”—the front cover for *Chemistry’s* DVD depicts the cast clothed and cuddled up together, and includes the playful subtitle “an experiment.” The movies themselves reflect these differences. Most people who criticize pornography—often having watched hardly any of it themselves—for moral rather than aesthetic reasons argue that violence constitutes an “explicit or implicit theme in pornography,”⁹ and that women in pornography are depicted as passive sex objects. Leaving the porn debates aside, I want to argue that the problem with most straight porn is not what it shows, but what it *doesn’t* show—a genuine attempt to convey female pleasure or subjectivity; the infinite variety of sexual experience and activity; heterosexual encounters that don’t end with external ejaculation; the preparation (such as the application of artificial lubricant) that generally goes into penetrative sex, and

anal sex in particular; the use of sex toys, like vibrators, during penetration in order for women to achieve orgasm; alternatives to racial stereotypes; the penetration of men by women or other men; and so on. It is not an overstatement to suggest that *Chemistry* comprises the first example of a mainstream American adult video that—to varying degrees—does show all of these things.

Taormino sets the stage for what we are about to experience in *Chemistry Vol. 1* in a voiceover sequence encapsulating many of the video's themes, and deliberately mimics the opening credits of *The Real World*:

This is the true story of seven porn stars picked to live in a house for 36 hours and have their lives taped. I know, it sounds like a rip-off of that very first reality show, but it isn't—it's better than that. It's seven porn stars, 36 hours, no script, no schedule, no holds barred. They decide the *who*, the *what*, the *when*, the *where* of their sex scenes. And then they come in here, into the confessional, and tell you the why. I want them to be themselves. I want them to show us a piece of their sexuality. That's not me getting in there and saying "do these five positions, do it in this place, do it at this time." That's the typical formula; that's not the one I want to follow.

The discourses of choice and authenticity communicated in this speech run throughout the video; the performers are explicitly endowed with subjectivity and framed as exerting spontaneous control over their own scenes and images. After sundown, the crew

leaves and the performers are purportedly left entirely to their own devices. As in *House of Ass*, the performers are given a (handheld) "perv cam" with which to film themselves; unlike *House of Ass*, footage derived from the perv cam comprises most of the video.

There is an implicit discourse of egalitarianism running throughout the text, indicated largely through the fact that there is no one cameraperson. Each performer in turn gets to film the other performers doing their scenes. There is no one star and, at least for the purposes of filming, after sundown there is no director. They talk to each other as they film one another—spontaneously joking around and philosophizing about sex and pornography, as well as talking dirty—and during group scenes in which Tristan asks questions for the whole group to answer, and they talk to Tristan in the confessionals. The result is that, with each performer, a remarkable amount of subjectivity is conveyed. It seems, upon finishing the video, that we've attained a sense of each person's unique personality and that all of them have had a good time. This is no small feat for a porno movie.

Whereas in *House of Ass*—like *The Real World*—interracial sex is brought up in such an individualized context as to preclude any genuine analysis, here racism is discussed as endemic to the industry. And, rather than the white performers, Mr. Marcus is asked

to communicate his outlook on the issue. Tristan asks him what he thinks of white women who won't have sex with black men in porn, and includes a full five minutes of his response in the final cut, during which he also gives a brief history of the industry's attitudes towards interracial coupling:

I remember when I first got into the business, you know, the only thing they would shoot would be white guys with black girls. I remember cable not wanting any type of interracial . . . There wasn't a market for it . . . But a lot of the younger girls are coming into the industry a lot more open. The urban culture is, you know, a lot more prevalent, and a lot more open-minded . . . Porn is a reflection of society—we're almost ahead of the crew when it comes to [sex].

Here Marcus appears to ascribe to the same liberal discourse that informed *The Real World's* approach to race relations: American society is improving and racism is dissipating because people in urban areas are open-minded. Nonetheless, there is quite a bit of insight packed into his response, and he is undoubtedly more articulate and self-aware than Joanna Angel had been on the same issue in *House of Ass*. His response also incorporates a relatively sophisticated argument about the systemic and often economically motivated ("there wasn't a market for it") nature of racism, and about the porn industry's relationship to society and the ways in which this

much-maligned genre—which, to its critics, appears to change very little over time—in some ways reflects and refracts changing societal attitudes towards race, gender, and sexuality. As this film constitutes such a radical departure from earlier standards, his remarks are also pointedly reflexive.

Moments like this occur throughout the movie, and they seem, among other things, designed to make the viewer feel better about what s/he is watching. First, the “reality” discourse enables us to believe that we’re seeing people have sex the way they *really* want to be having it, and that—rather than being in any way coerced into performing—these people are doing it because they want to. There are, however, also a number of ways in which the text undermines this sentiment. In one early scene in which Kurt holds the perv cam while talking to a partially clothed Mika Tan, they indicate through a hand gesture that “money” is a primary reason for participating in the project; Kurt has, at this point, already mentioned his financial motivations twice. This rather subversive reminder that they are paid performers—that is, that they are not in fact having sex with each other just because they want to be having sex with each other, but also because they want to get paid for doing so—is as sure a way as any to break whatever sexual reverie the viewer may have fallen into. There are other moments—as when Kurt says to

Mika that he “has to work in ten minutes”—that belie Taormino’s claim that they are working without a schedule, and still others—as when Mr. Marcus acknowledges that porn stars are “different . . . sexually different,” and Dana DeArmond indicates that it is a popular misconception that “girls in porn need, like, really huge cocks”—that act as reminders that mainstream pornography generally does not show sex as it really is. This does work to set *Chemistry* apart from typical porn, to assert its own authenticity amidst the morass of pornographic falsehood. Yet, the self-reflexivity of these moments nonetheless complicates this differentiation by acknowledging the limitations of conventions to which this film in many ways must comply.

Working against this, the introduction of gender nonconformity and transgressive sexuality, combined with a reversal of typical racial politics in pornography, comes when, in the second sex scene, we see Filipina performer Mika Tan strap on a dildo and penetrate the ass of white porn star Kurt Lockwood. Of course this does not constitute a first for pornography; Carol Queen, Ph.D., led that charge in 1999 with *Bend Over Boyfriend*. That, however, was an instructional video specifically about women anally penetrating men, with limited distribution, and the performers were not so much porn stars as middle-aged intellectuals; this is a mainstream porno movie

released by one of the major studios, Vivid Video. Furthermore, it is not an isolated occurrence in the text; images of her penetrating him in various positions appear throughout the movie and twice as extended sex scenes. And, as numerous critics and academics have commented on the tendency in porn to portray Asian women stereotypically as submissive and subservient, this scene proves all the more revolutionary by virtue of the fact that it involves an Asian-American woman penetrating a white man.

Perhaps the last major taboo that mainstream heterosexual porn is unwilling to transgress is that of male-on-male sex. Girl-on-girl is standard in any “straight” porn; regardless of how they identify in their personal lives, all women in porn are bisexual onscreen.¹⁰ *Chemistry* again is notable for its inclusion of a discussion of this issue. Its counterpart to the drama of Jezebelle and Justin leaving in *House of Ass* is the attempt to get performer Marie Luv to do a girl/girl scene. Marie admits to being comfortable having sex with women only if a man is involved, as in a threesome situation. Mika Tan, on the other hand, speaks at length about how she is genuinely bisexual and enjoys being with women as much as being with men. Male on male sex is, not surprisingly, entirely absent. The only mainstream (that is, marketed as heterosexual) adult video ever to involve a male/

male scene was *The (Sex) Zone* (1997). The director, Paul Thomas, “got a very bad reaction” to the movie from the industry and critics; it is unclear whether the reaction among viewers was generally negative as well. ¹¹

In *Chemistry*, when Mika suggests that she would like to penetrate (an unwilling) Jack Lawrence as well Kurt Lockwood, Mr. Marcus—presently in possession of the perv cam—says uncomfortably that he “would definitely put the camera down at that point.” For his part, Kurt is perfectly comfortable with enjoying being penetrated and explains in a confessional that this does not make him gay, as any scene between a man and a woman—regardless of the sex acts they perform—is straight. That it is so important for him to iterate this is indicative of the fact that, as he puts it, “the industry has been shooting the same shit for 20 years.” Homophobia continues to run rampant, and this penetration of a man by a woman—regardless of how vehemently he feels the need to insist that it does not make him gay (and it doesn’t)—constitutes a step along the way to a genuine challenge to the established conventions of mainstream pornography. I would also argue that it allows us to read *Chemistry* as a queer text in the general sense of the word; that is, it transgresses typical gendered and sexual norms.

Many of the representational issues from *House of Ass* are raised and reframed in *Chem-*


istry. Indeed, *Chemistry* is in many ways the inverse of *House of Ass*: where Scott Nails believes eating pussy to be a waste of time, Jack Lawrence suggests that there is nothing he’d rather do; where Joanna Angel brings up her hesitation to engage in interracial sex without adequately questioning the assumptions that have informed it, Mr. Marcus speaks to systemic racism in the porn industry; where *House of Ass* ends every scene, typically and androcentrically, with a facial cum shot, *Chemistry* allows for a number of different endings (although the typical one still predominates); perhaps most importantly, where the cast of *House of Ass* seems thrown together and the gestures toward endowing them with subjectivity half-hearted, the cast of *Chemistry* manages to constitute both a coherent and harmonious group and a collection of unique individuals with distinct personalities.

It appears as though, in the second video, Taormino has learned from mistakes made in the first. Gail Dines argues that in pornography the black man’s “wholeness as a human being is rendered invisible.”¹² Yet, one might just as easily ask: in pornography, generally speaking, whose “wholeness as a human being” is *not* rendered invisible? It is a matter of degrees—this is not, after all, a genre that generally seeks to depict well-rounded characters or complex human relations; its focus is the interaction of genitalia. And this,

finally, is why *Chemistry* proves so remarkable; all of the performers come off as comfortable with themselves and their sexuality, thoughtful and intelligent, and supportive of one another—that is, as whole human beings who are, if hornier than the rest of us, perhaps also less neurotic and more self-aware than most. The convention of the confessional and the distinct claims for authenticity borrowed from reality TV—a genre that at once insists upon its social relevance and refuses to take itself too seriously—allow for a self-consciously cerebral yet playful examination of racial and sexual politics in the mainstream adult video industry; surely no other format would indulge the pontifications of porn performers without condemning the movie to fall into obscurity almost before its release.

As it is, the novelty of the use of these conventions in *Chemistry* has prompted *Adult Video News*, the industry’s primary trade magazine, to designate it “the purest example ever of high concept reality porn,” and has enabled the bill that includes performers filming and directing themselves—even interlarded as it is with their subjectivity and discussions of racial and sexual politics—to pass unchecked through the industry’s old boys’ network. The full potential for the borrowing of generic conventions was not borne out until the economic success of *House of Ass* earned for Taormino the level of creative control

demonstrated in *Chemistry*, which I have argued has enabled her to create a genuinely feminist, queer, and transgressive text. It is by no means perfect, nor is it perfectly any of these things, but in a sense (and only in this sense) it can be seen as more queer than explicitly gay or lesbian porn, which is ghettoized as such, in that it subverts the expectations of its intended audience. The average straight man probably is not expecting to watch other men being penetrated in a porno marketed as mainstream and heterosexual, and the DVD packaging for *Chemistry Vol. 1* does not include any warning or even any neutral indication that the video includes such content, so to me it seems a bit like an ambush—subversive content hidden in a mainstream porno, designed to catch straight men with their pants down, as it were, and forcing them to examine their own assumptions. Whether or not this will have any “real world” effects remains to be determined, but the effects on the porn world so far have been small but unmistakable—*Chemistry Vol. 3* has already been released, and later installments are currently in production. Taormino, at least, is having her way with the porn industry, and with any luck, more feminist producers and directors soon will follow suit.

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NOTES

1. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* 2nd ed., (Berkeley: UC Press, 1999).
2. Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 46.
3. Jeffrey Sconce, “See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo!” *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 262.
4. This constitutes the first installment in the *Chemistry* series, of which at least two other videos are already in production.
5. Constance Penley, “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” *Porn Studies*, Ed. Linda Williams, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. By “mainstream,” I refer to the sort of porn that one could find in a typical adult video store.
7. Jon Kraszewski, “Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV’s *The Real World*,” *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 179.

8. This idea is elaborated in Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, Ed. G. Bridges and R. Brunt, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1981).
9. This quote is from Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). But the sentiment can be found in the writings of Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and many other “second-wave” feminists.
10. Mika Tan exposes this hypocrisy in a confessional in which she speaks eloquently about how she is in fact bisexual in her personal life, and how much she enjoys working with other women who genuinely like women.
11. According to Mark Kernes, interview with the author, 9 June 2006.
12. Gail Dines, “King Kong and the White Woman: Hustler Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity,” *Violence Against Women* Vol. 4 No. 3, (June 1998): 293.