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Panel Review: "After the Sex Wars: Pornography and Feminism"

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Pornography and Feminism AFTER THE SEX WARS

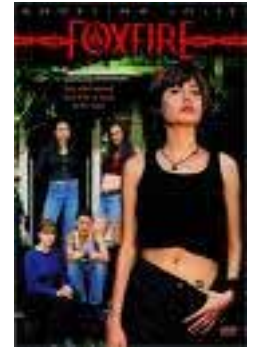
By deconstructing filmic representations, feminist theoretical formations, and the intersections of race, class, and gender, the provocative panel, “Pornography and Feminism: After the Sex Wars,” reached beyond the anti-porn/sex-positive dichotomy to theorize feminism and pornography’s complex relationship. The panel, comprised of members of UC Santa Cruz’s Feminism and Pornography Research Cluster, featured Allison Day (Linguistics), Katie Kanagawa (Literature), Lulu Meza (Sociology), Lydia Osolinsky (Politics), and Natalie Purcell (Sociology). The panel was moderated by Professor H. Marshall Leicester, faculty advisor for the Feminism and Pornography Research Cluster.

In her presentation, “History in the Making: Feminism’s Second-Wave Sex Wars and the Politics of Remembering,” Lydia Osolinsky proposed alternative theoretical approaches to the pro/anti-sex debates that emerged during the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Presenting the narratives of the debates as well as how they have been subsequently described,

Osolinsky showed that feminism(s)’ relation to pornography is always in a constant state of becoming. However, she also noted that within this formation process there is little examination of the disconnect between the rhetoric and the embodied experience of pornography. Rather than focusing on dominant culture’s readings of pornography that re-inscribe heterosexist gender relations and the victimization of women, Osolinsky proposed using Eve Sedgwick’s concepts of paranoid and surprise readings to probe this disconnect and uncover the subversive possibilities of pornography and the agency of its subjects.

Following in this vein, Katie Kanagawa’s presentation, “FOXFIRE REVENGE!: Feminist Avengers Revisit the ‘Wars’ Over Sex and Imagery,” recaptured female agency by reading subjectivization instead of female subjugation in the 1996 film adaptation of Joyce Carol Oates’ novel, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. Rejecting an anti-pornography lens of analysis that essentializes sex/gender roles

and defines sex as male acts of desire enacted on female bodies, Kanagawa adopted a feminist stance that recognized the agency of female characters without negating the subjugation of women and the danger of sexual violence.



Returning to feminist theoretical formations, Natalie Purcell presented “A Materialist Analysis of Feminist Discourse on Pornography.” Engaging the audience with quotes from Annie Sprinkle (*Hardcore from the Heart*, 2006) and Andrea Dworkin (“Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography and Equality,” 1985), two prominent figures from the pro-sex and anti-pornography camps, respectively, Purcell demonstrated that both works have the power to evoke affective responses from the reader, despite their opposing theoretical orientations. She then questioned how to link the affective

with the material as well as how to define the material, particularly within pornography. While anti-pornography feminists often conflate pornographic fantasy with reality, pro-sex feminists attempt to preserve the fantasy with reality. In order to escape the limitations of both, Purcell offered Karen Barad's notions of materialist feminism which joins the discursive with the material as well as the personal with the relational. While there are increased risks in vulnerability by creating this aperture in feminism's pro/anti-pornography discussion, there is also the great potential for developing more complex and robust theories on feminisms' relation to pornography.

In "Diversifying Pornography," Allison Day queered the discussion by analyzing the new significations that penetration presents in queer/lesbian pornography. If the act of penetration is mapped to dominance and power, and mainstream pornography maps power to traditional gender roles, does penetration in queer pornography still represent dominance when it is divorced from males? Giving examples of penetration divorced from a male penetrator, such as masturbation with sex toys and sex with strap-ons, Day showed how penetration in queer pornography divorces sexual desire and dominance from males and destabilizes notions

of power between genders. While roles of domination and submission remain, they are not tied to gender and/or anatomy. Day also pointed out that the cum shot, one of the most powerful symbols of male dominance within mainstream pornography, is noticeably absent within queer porn. Instead of a clear or definitive climax, queer pornography features multiple orgasms, acts of affection, and other acts of pleasure and desire that vary widely. The lack of a clear climax also destabilizes positions of dominance and submission that are tied to traditional gender roles in mainstream pornography. Through thoughtful and critical analysis, Day demonstrated pornography's radical and healing potential and the importance of defending the medium for its possibilities.

The final panelist, Lulu Meza, presented "Women of Color, Hypersexuality, and Porn." Opening her presentation, Meza shared a personal anecdote of watching a pornographic film featuring a woman of color that left her feeling both disturbed and intrigued. She terms these conflicting feelings a "productive perversity," one worth exploring in attempts to create critical new subjectivities for women of color within pornography. Meza observes that despite the film's hypersexualization of the woman for her ethnicity and the accordant

assumptions of her "exotic-ness" and sexual availability, the woman still managed to exercise agency and authorship through her gaze and overall presence in the film. After identifying both hypersexuality and agency, Meza spoke of yearning for better representations and realities for women of color. She proposed that by locating and representing women of color's joys, pleasures, and empowerment, there lies great potential for forming new subjectivities and crafting new knowledges.

As these presentations demonstrate, feminisms' relation to pornography is neither singular nor static. Through critical, self-reflexive inquiry and analysis, feminisms' dialog with pornography (and arguably other forms of sex work) and sexuality will outgrow dichotomous pro/anti approaches and further explore and theorize the complexities, contradictions, and embodied experiences of women and pornography.

T-Kay Sangwand recently graduated from UCLA's joint master's degrees program in Information Studies and Latin American Studies. She is currently the Human Rights Archivist at the University of Texas at Austin.