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Pornographic Subordination, Power, and Feminist Alternatives[1]

Matt L. Drabek

Abstract

How does pornography subordinate on the basis of gender? I provide part of an answer in this paper by framing subordination as something that works through everyday classification. Under certain material and social conditions, pornography classifies people through labeling them in ways that connect to structures of oppression. I hope to show two things. First, pornographic content is not the major driving force behind pornography's subordination of women. Second, pornography, when repurposed in new ways, carries the potential to counter the ill effects of other kinds of pornography, as feminist pornographers have attempted to show through their words and actions.

Keywords: pornography, subordination, classification, oppression

How does pornography subordinate on the basis of gender? I provide part of an answer in this paper by framing subordination as a process that works through classification in everyday life. Under certain material and social conditions, pornography classifies people through labeling them in ways that connect to structures of oppression. The material and social environment in which pornography is viewed sometimes encourages this classification through labeling, and the subordination that results. I begin from the assumption that pornography has the *power* to subordinate, and I trace out the operations of this power, which work through a kind of feedback loop. But this paper is not a defense of anti-porn feminism, in either an 'unmodified' or 'moderate' version. In explicating the role of the material and social environment in pornography's operations, I hope to provide strong evidence in favor of two claims. The first is that pornographic *content* is not the major driving force behind pornography's gender subordination. The second is

[1] I would like to thank the audience and fellow participants at the Feminist Philosophy and Pornography conference at the Humboldt University of Berlin for important feedback on this paper. I'd also like to thank, in particular, Louise Antony, Anne Eaton, and Rae Langton for feedback and direction on this paper, as well as the anonymous referees for this journal.

that pornography, when repurposed in new ways, carries the potential to counter the ill effects of other kinds of pornography, as feminist pornographers have attempted to show through their words and their work. The sort of feedback loop that drives pornographic subordination may also work to counter it.

Pornography

Historically, the claim that pornography subordinates on the basis of gender has been formulated as the claim that pornography subordinates women, where 'women' can be read to mean 'cisgender women.'[2] This claim is historically associated with a segment of anti-porn feminism led by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (MacKinnon 1982, 1987) and brought to the attention of academic philosophers in the early 1990s by Rae Langton (Langton 1993). To subordinate a group of people, as a group, is to rank that group as inferior or to authorize ill treatment of that group (Langton 1993, 307). I consider subordination to be one component of broader, interlocking systems of oppression. Subordination is what feminist theorist Iris Marion Young called a 'face' of oppression. Oppression is a general inhibition of one's ability to develop, exercise one's capacities, or express one's needs as a result of systemic social forces (Young 2011). As a face of oppression, the subordination of a group paves the way for their marginalization, or exclusion from meaningful participation in social life. When a community ranks a group as inferior, it facilitates their exclusion from positions of influence or authority.

In this paper I assume that pornography has the power to subordinate women, and I ask how this power works. While the operations of power are relevant to much of the philosophical literature on pornography, it is rarely the main topic or focus. Much of this literature focuses on authority, and particularly linguistic authority. I address power rather than authority because I want to focus solely on getting at how pornography changes the world without considering whether it does so as a speech act. The literature on authority, by contrast, is often focused on the specific question within the philosophy of language of whether, and to what extent, the person who is subordinated or the society at large must recognize the legitimacy of pornography's authority for it to count as an authoritative speech act in the relevant sense (e.g., Green 1998; Langton 1998; Antony 2012). Langton and others (e.g., Langton 2009; Langton and West 2009) have argued that pornography has the linguistic authority to subordinate. But I address the literature on authority only

[2] It's possible that the claim is trans-inclusive, and it could certainly be formulated in a trans-inclusive way, but examples involving trans women are exceedingly rare in the literature.

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insofar as it provides us with background reasons to focus on social and material contexts. From where does pornography get its powers? How do these powers operate? Langton takes pornography to be an embodied practice, something enacted within a material and social environment and meaningful in light of these contextual features. I think this is insightful and will use it as my own starting point. In the following section, after discussing what pornography is, I will move on to a discussion of how pornography's power operates. The main claims of this paper should stand regardless of how the debate over whether pornography has the authority to count as a speech act is settled.

What Is Pornography? What Does Pornography Do?

Internet users have articulated 'Rule 34,' which says that 'if it exists, there is porn of it.'[3] Utterances of rule 34 are tongue-in-cheek, but only partially so. Rule 34 expresses one popular understanding of the word 'pornography.' On this understanding, 'pornography' picks out sexually explicit material produced and distributed commercially to general audiences for the purposes of sexual gratification. It's merely a descriptive term without any normative implications. People who talk about Rule 34 are pointing to the explosion of sexually explicit material in the Internet age. The determined viewer can find just about any scenario, any fetish, any combination of identities, sexual desires, and sexual positions imaginable. One's ability to find the sexually explicit material one wants seems to be limited only by one's wallet and one's ability to navigate the Internet. I also take it as a starting point that most people have something like this understanding of pornography in mind when they discuss it. If it's a written description, graphic video, sound file, audio cassette (so very passé), or any other commercial medium with sexually explicit content generally sold for purposes of sexual gratification, it's pornography.

It would be fair to present this descriptive definition of pornography as apolitical in nature. Most people who use it are not using it for the purpose of identifying and/or ameliorating oppression. Nevertheless, descriptive uses of the word 'pornography' do appear in feminist literature organized around this specific purpose. Ann Garry, for instance, uses a descriptive definition in her work, finding it to be a useful, neutral starting point that recognizes sexually explicit material as a force for both good and ill (Garry 2002). She then uses this starting point to launch into a more directed analysis. Feminist work in this vein often aims at identifying and/or ameliorating oppression in part by separating the good from the ill.

[3] http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Rule%2034. Last accessed May 18, 2014.

But other feminists like MacKinnon and Langton begin from the same goals of identifying and/or ameliorating oppression, and use a novel definition of 'pornography' in order to direct their work. They define 'pornography' in terms of subordination, claiming that part of what it means for sexually explicit material to be pornography is that it subordinates women. This is quite a claim. Few feminists, probably no feminists, would deny that *some* pornography *sometimes causes* women to be subordinated. But each italicized word modifies the claim, leaving open the possibility of pornography of a different sort, whether banal pornography that does not affect women as a group or perhaps even liberatory pornography that combats subordination. MacKinnon and Langton remove the modifiers, instead claiming that pornography is sexually explicit, commercial material that *constitutes* the subordination of women. It does not merely sometimes cause subordination, but rather always, in fact, *is* subordination.

There's a broad and a narrow way to read the claim that pornography constitutes subordination. The broad way claims that all or most sexually explicit material subordinates women, thus defining pornography almost as broadly as the descriptive approach. As Jennifer Saul notes (2003, 76–78), anti-porn feminists in the Dworkin/MacKinnon tradition sometimes seem to hold this view. But it's quite a bold claim, as it would commit one to holding the view that even seemingly banal or affirmative sexually explicit material subordinates women. The narrow way claims that only those sexually explicit materials that subordinate women count as pornography, leaving open the possibility that there's a wide range of such materials that do not subordinate women and hence would not count as pornography. While *prima facie* less difficult to defend, this interpretation leaves us with the question of what to call these other materials. Some have defended a distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography,' a distinction that raises as many questions as answers.[4] Stipulating that pornography is being defined for specific social goals may, of course, advance the extent to which these issues can be overcome. Until we reexamine the

[4] The distinction is a classic of second wave feminism (e.g., Steinem 1984) and is typically framed in terms of the content of the (allegedly) pornographic material at issue. For example, 'erotica' might be defined in terms of mutual pleasure or intellectual stimulation while 'pornography' is defined strictly in terms of physical stimulation or commercial profit. Opponents of this distinction typically argue that it's an arbitrary distinction relying primarily on the class background (i.e., middle class sensibilities) of the person drawing the distinction. I'll take no official position on the success of the distinction, though insofar as the distinction is grounded in the *content* of (allegedly) pornographic images, it should be covered by my argument that content-based distinctions are unsuccessful.

question of pornography's definition, I will try to use the word neutrally between the descriptive and various normative approaches.

Constitutive and Causal Approaches

While feminists have approached pornography through a variety of lenses, the philosophical literature is dominated by constitutive and causal approaches. Constitutive approaches begin from a normative understanding of pornography, where pornography constitutes subordination. Langton's speech act analysis of pornography is the best known constitutive approach. On Langton's analysis, pornographic content is speech that performs the action of subordinating women. It subordinates through the authority it has amongst its predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual male audience. This is the authority to rank women as inferior, deprive women of rights, and justify the ill treatment of women. The basic idea of Langton's speech act analysis, with its background in speech act theory (Austin 1962), is that pornography's authority enables it to perform these acts of subordination *through* or *by way of* its content, namely the words, sex acts, bodies, gestures, motions, and other features of individual works of pornography.

One primary concern of Langton's, and the one on which she has faced the greatest challenges, is on developing the analogy between pornography and linguistic acts in such a way as to build a case that pornography has the right sort of authority to subordinate. She has compared the workings of pornography to the rulings of judges in civil or criminal proceedings. Through rulings, judges have the authority to issue factual statements and to change the word in accordance with their rulings (Langton 1993, 304–5). Judges may, for instance, rule that a violation of the law or civil code has occurred and guarantee that the world conforms to this judgment by issuing a civil or criminal penalty. Langton has also compared the operations of pornography to those of hate speech or libel. A sign such as "WHITES ONLY," placed in front of a restroom or water fountain in the American South in the Jim Crow era, served to subordinate black people in those regions. The sign does not merely *cause* black people to be subordinated, Langton argues. Rather, in virtue of being placed in the appropriate context and conveying a particular message, it *constitutes* subordination through its content that is generally perceived as legitimate (Langton 1998). Opponents such as Louise Antony have argued that this analysis conflates authority with power and incorrectly interprets Austin on what is required for genuine authority (Antony 2012).

Philosophers who defend causal approaches argue that works of pornography *cause* the subordination of women through some form of causal chain. Causal and constitutive approaches are not inherently opposed, as a causal critic of pornography might argue that a causal chain advances the constitutive enactment of patriarchal norms. But the approaches differ in emphasis, as the causal critic may

see pornography as some independent thing with a nexus of causal links to patriarchal culture. Causal critiques are also compatible with a descriptive definition of pornography as inclusive of all sexually explicit materials produced commercially and distributed to public audiences for the purpose of sexual gratification, though it is not a *requirement* that the causal critic adopt this definition.

Anne Eaton, a causal critic of pornography, raises the interesting possibility that there is a causal feedback loop between the subordination caused by individual pornographic works and gender inequalities in a broader society (Eaton 2007). Below, where I will begin to sketch out my own views on pornography's power, I will use Eaton's insight as a starting point. Eaton's idea is that individual pornographic works, when viewed, make relatively small contributions to the subordination of women that, in turn, fit into the contexts provided by a patriarchal society. These small contributions to subordination confirm and extend a broader system of gender subordination. Eaton's causal critique is elastic, responsive to the diversity of sexually explicit material currently available on the market and to a wide variety of causal origins. She allows for the possibility that "both pornography and its putative harms are collateral effects of some common cause" (713–34), a possibility she leaves open to confirmation or disconfirmation by empirical investigation. She also acknowledges that pornography might not be exceptionally effective at causing subordination when compared to *other* sources of gender subordination in patriarchal societies, sources like advertisements that objectify women or cultural prejudices that prevent women from holding political offices. She has, in short, the beginnings of a system to explain the continuity between sexually explicit material and broader gender norms, laying out a program that can aid future empirical work and feminist analysis.

There have been a variety of other proposed models for how pornography subordinates that do not necessarily fit cleanly into either a constitutive or causal approach (though most would appear to have great affinity with causal approaches). These models generally go beyond the claim that cisgender, heterosexual men who use pornography merely *imitate* what they see. A straightforward imitation model would appear to be a shortsighted model that fails to give people credit for being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality and incorporate what they see into their sex lives in more subtle ways (Soble 2002). More sophisticated and plausible models focus on cultural climate and its relationship to the ways young men develop sexual desires. Some theorists, for instance, have speculated that pornography reinforces and generates social beauty standards and the excitement of sex outside the context of committed relationships (Brosius et al. 1993).[5] Others argue for a

[5] The point about sex outside of committed relationships raises a broad range of additional issues. It's far from clear why sex outside of relationships is a bad thing,

generalized version of this idea, claiming that pornography changes the norms surrounding relationships, changing how men view women and how women view themselves, and contributing to a culture of sexual violence against women (Paul 2005). These more plausible models are contextual ones, and contextual in a variety of senses.

Pornography and Context

Philosophical critiques of pornography generally recognize the importance of context to how pornography's power operates. This research has often followed Langton's lead and been conducted within the tradition of the speech act model. However, the drawing of attention to context has broader import. I'll discuss linguistic context in this section before moving on to demonstrate the need for a renewed focus on social and material contexts, which forms the basis of my own approach.

Jennifer Saul claims that pornography, on a speech act model, can only perform the act of subordinating if it is an utterance in context (Saul 2006). But Saul goes a bit further. She points out that when we are considering pornography, we can ask whether it is the *production* or the *viewing* of pornography that constitutes the relevant context. Does pornography subordinate through the ways it is made or through the ways it is consumed? Saul uses the metaphors of *encoding* and *decoding* to pick out the respective utterances. She uses a simple thought experiment to support her view that *decoding*, or *viewing*, is the relevant context. Suppose Ethel finds herself in an environment requiring the use of multi-purpose signs to communicate. She creates a sign saying 'I do,' using it "to get married, to agree to return her books on time, and to confess to murder" (2006, 235). Analogously, a work of pornography may be put to many uses. Pornography may sexually arouse or offend its viewers. One might use examples of pornography in a seminar designed to criticize pornography. One might use pornography to instruct people how to perform a particular sex act or technique. Saul points out that the relevant acts, the acts that subordinate women, appear in only some of these uses. Furthermore, the fact that pornography has many uses, as does Ethel's sign, demonstrates that the production of sexually explicit materials does not fix a context of viewing. Tracing how pornography subordinates thus depends heavily on studying the *viewing* of pornography (Bianchi 2008; Mikkola 2008), tracing how that viewing occurs and how particular contexts of viewing serve to facilitate subordination.

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and the person appealing to this research would have to tell a good story on this issue.

While the importance of linguistic context is widely recognized, MacKinnon and Langton have long recognized the importance of social and material contexts, as well. Langton advocates that "we shift our perspective on the asymmetric patterns of sexual violence and view it afresh, not simply as harm or as crime, but as an *aspect* of women's subordinate status" (Langton 1993, 307). The social and material contexts are critical to understanding the total picture of gender subordination, how pornographic subordination operates through linking to a larger structure. So, what's so important about the social and material contexts of pornography? In short, I think we can learn a great deal from examining the *standard* or *typical* uses of works of pornography in Western culture, particularly among men and *especially* among adolescent men who are learning about sex and sexual mores. It's here that we find out how pornography serves to classify people in everyday life.

This is a project that builds upon Saul's insights. Saul shows, quite correctly, that we ought to be concerned about viewings of pornography. We can narrow this focus by asking questions about how people use pornography at social and material sites. What social roles do works of pornography play? What do people usually *do* with pornography in particular places? What are they expected to do? Through which media is pornography delivered, and do these media affect the types of pornography that can be produced and consumed? Has the Internet changed any of the facts on the ground, and what difference has this made? The subordination of social groups on the basis of gender does not emerge from one or two negative events or viewings, but rather from a broad pattern of problems. If pornography subordinates women, it must do so broadly and effectively in particular environments. We ought to see this when we ask these questions about pornography's social and material sites. Theorizing about pornography, and responding to it, thus depends on understanding something about its role in local environments.

Implications of a Shift to Social and Material Contexts

What implications does a renewed emphasis on social and material contexts have for a study of pornography's subordination? For one, I think causal approaches focus too narrowly on the *content* of *individual* works of pornography, and that there's a need for more of a focus on environment. Both italicized words are key. Defenders of causal critiques often try to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' types of pornography. Eaton, for instance, distinguishes between inegalitarian pornography and all other types of pornography (non-inegalitarian pornography), defining inegalitarian pornography as "sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequality" (2007, 676). This is more a distinction between 'bad' and 'not so bad' than between 'bad' and 'good.'

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At first glance, it's difficult to argue that there is not a systematic distinction between good and bad pornography, or at least between bad and not-so-bad pornography. The intuitive appeal of the distinction lies in the impression that certain kinds of sexually explicit material are more harmful than other kinds. It seems like sexually explicit material eroticizing relations of gender inequality is worse than banal sexually explicit material or sexually explicit material characterized by intimate, loving sexual relationships. Suppose we have two Internet videos. The first video depicts a man in spiked leather striking a nude woman with a flogger, while the second video depicts a woman masturbating alone. One might want to say that the former video is more harmful than the latter. It certainly seems as though the former presents a range of problems not presented by the latter. Attempts by governments to restrict pornography often make use of this intuitive distinction. Iceland, for instance, has considered a ban on what it calls 'violent' pornography on the grounds that violence in pornography may beget violence in domestic relationships. Even many strong opponents of pornography, people committed to labeling all pornography as the subordination of women, sometimes acknowledge that some types are worse than others. Gail Dines, an anti-porn sociologist, says that pornography, quite9 generally, "shifts the way people think about sexual relationships, about intimacy, about women" (McVeigh 2013). But not all pornography is created equal. She considers the case of the adolescent boy who is being socialized into pornography, noting that a young boy searching for pornography "doesn't get some *Playboy* pictures" (ibid.). Rather, Dines is concerned that the adolescent boy will find pictures and videos of women being physically assaulted and brutalized, which she implicitly takes to be worse than those *Playboy* pictures.

The trouble with such distinctions between types of pornography is that they are not supported by empirical evidence and there is substantial overlap between inegalitarian pornography and other types of pornography. Eaton does cite empirical support suggesting a link between inegalitarian pornography and gender subordination. However, the empirical literature does not consistently draw the inegalitarian/non-inegalitarian distinction, leaving it currently unable to support this link. To some degree, Eaton is aware of this problem and acknowledges it. She recognizes the possibility that "any erotic material would have this effect" (Eaton 2007, 688n), i.e., the effect of changing male attitudes toward women. But even beyond the empirical troubles, we simply do not have good reason to believe that gender subordination tracks the inegalitarian/non-inegalitarian distinction. This is to say that we have reason to believe that a great deal of non-inegalitarian pornography is involved in gender subordination and a great deal of inegalitarian pornography is not involved in gender subordination.

Let's examine a number of cases. Consider a case of seemingly banal or harmless sexually explicit materials, perhaps a short video of a man and woman engaged in uneventful sexual intercourse or the banal *Playboy* photos mentioned by Dines. These are things that would appear on the 'non-inegalitarian' side of the inegalitarian/non-inegalitarian distinction. These videos and images do not eroticize gender inequality, at least not in virtue of the content of the videos and images themselves. But I think banal pornography often *does* contribute to gender subordination when it is produced and viewed in the right social and material contexts. Adolescent boys and girls who view this material internalize and advance assumptions about the body and about sex. And they do so, at least in part, because they are not trained to critically examine this material. It presents no obvious problems, but it may function as a kind of Trojan horse. Even a callous adolescent boy is going to react somewhat skeptically to videos of someone being beaten senselessly. What boy would react in the same way to seemingly harmless sex? But boys learn from this seemingly harmless material how women are expected to look and act, in some cases specifically because they are taught to see it as harmless. They learn from these images that women are not supposed to have pubic hair, leg hair, or armpit hair. They learn how to perform sexual positions that are unsatisfying to women, and they learn a model of female pleasure that does not match what most women actually do or want to do.[6]

This sort of material is ubiquitous on the Internet. Much of it is banal and uninteresting to the point of being comical. How many people in real life enjoy having sex with one another with only their genitals touching? How many women enjoy moaning theatrically while not experiencing pleasure? How many men enjoy thrusting and grunting in a programmatic, robotic way? These positions seem to work perfectly well for the target audience of mainstream pornography, namely the heterosexual, cisgender, white male who is masturbating alone in a room. But when these lessons transfer from masturbation session to sexual activity with a partner, they can engender gender subordination. They are not teaching sexual activity that the partners of these young men are likely to enjoy.

These banal images and videos, even when they are not advancing gender subordination in virtue of their content, may advance gender subordination in the aggregate, as a part of a broader pattern of pornographic content and delivery. A single image of a nude woman staring longingly at the camera presents no obvious problem. A single video of a heterosexual couple engaged in intercourse, missionary position, where the man orgasms and the woman moans theatrically, might not be a

[6] For a comparison of banal representations and reality, see the video "Porn Sex vs. Real Sex: The Differences Explained with Food." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q64hTNEj6KQ. Last accessed August 16, 2013.

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problem on the surface. These things seem like perfectly harmless fun or perfect boredom, as the case may be. But these things could drive gender subordination in the aggregate when disproportionately produced. If an absurdly disproportionate percent of nude images are images of women and not men, and if an absurdly disproportionate percent of videos of heterosexual intercourse depict genuine male pleasure and lack depictions of genuine female pleasure, gender subordination may result. Thus, it seems that non-inegalitarian material might subordinate.

The other side fares no better. There's a wide range of material that would be called 'inegalitarian' that does not subordinate. When causal critics advance the claim that inegalitarian material advances gender subordination, I suspect what they have in mind are those sexually explicit representations found in a great deal of "mainstream" pornography. They have in mind images of men choking women, women gagging on penises while engaged in deep throating, gangbang porn, and other forms of physical discomfort and humiliation (not in the BDSM sense) directed at women. However, the world of sexually explicit representations is vast and diverse. The genre of sadomasochist pornography, in particular, is full of material that is unabashedly inegalitarian, but often careful to incorporate discussion and enactment of explicit consent and positive sexual exploration among practitioners. The eroticization of violence, humiliation, and gender inequality are common, but often done in an affirmative way. Practitioners discuss what they do and do not like, they construct and use safe words to let each other know when things have gone too far, and they negotiate and agree to every aspect of the sexual event. The BDSM community is careful to document this procedure with appropriate terminology, using a thick notion of consent and stipulating that everything in a 'scene' must be consensual. Insofar as this material is used primarily by insiders looking to explore sexuality in a similarly affirmative way, it seems very unlikely that this inegalitarian material advances gender subordination.

While sadomasochist pornography is one of the clearer examples, commercial sexually explicit material is diverse in any number of ways that challenge any attempt to systematically link types of content to degree of gender subordination. While a great deal of material eroticizing gender inequality surely advances subordination, there are also entire subgenres of sexually explicit representations that eroticize gender equality or violence in ways that depict *men* as inferior to *women*.[7] There's also a great deal of material eroticizing gender inequalities in ways that do not uphold any kind of strict binary between cisgender men and cisgender women. There's material depicting trans* people (who might be

[7] Of course, sexually explicit material geared around female domination may still subordinate, particularly if it's based on male fantasies that men attempt to push onto their partners.

women, men, or nonbinary) both as inferior and superior to men and women, both cisgender and transgender. Some of this inegalitarian material appears very unlikely to advance the subordination of women, both in virtue of its content and in virtue of its likely audience.

Where does this leave us with respect to the anti-porn feminist critiques found in the literature and our project of explaining pornography's power to subordinate? Causal approaches, particularly Eaton's, leave us with an outline of how subordination might work, namely through causal interactions between pornography and broader gender norms. But social and material contexts prove to be more important than the actual content emphasized in many causal approaches. I think we are also in a position to see the serious shortcomings of normative definitions of 'pornography.' Those definitions may have once been helpful for certain legal projects. MacKinnon, for instance, famously drafted civil rights ordinances for the cities of Minneapolis and Indianapolis that made use of this narrow definition of pornography (MacKinnon 1987; Lacey 1998). But for someone interested in a broad picture of pornography and its social effects, MacKinnon's normative definition is awkward. It leaves out much of what one would intuitively want to count as pornography, even if we have a specifically ameliorative purpose to an analysis of pornography. How about representations that do not depict subordination, or representations that are banal or harmless? How about representations that depict banal and consensual sexual intercourse between men and women? How about representations that depict women or men masturbating alone? How about representations depicting men having consensual, loving sex with men? Each of these cases may be important for getting at how social and material contexts contribute to subordination, and thus may play some role in the analysis.

Using a narrow definition and emphasizing the role of pornographic content are two moves that leave us in a difficult position to explain how pornography's power operates. The idea that pornography subordinates through its content, by content embedded within a society that facilitates subordination, is important to the starting point of both constitutive and causal approaches. But many of the cases of apparent pornographic subordination are cases where the content is not doing the relevant work. There's pornographic content, as presumably there must be in order for something to count as pornography, but it's not the content that's driving the subordination. What we find in many cases is a range of banal content not depicting subordination that is still a part of a broader causal pattern of subordination. Consider the website TeXXXans.[8] This website contained banal, seemingly harmless

[8] http://www.texxxans.com. The site was recently shut down and is not active as of March 30, 2014. In conversation, Eaton suggested that this website, depending on the details of its contents, might not count as pornography for aesthetic reasons.

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images of nude women. What's the problem? The website is an example of a vicious subgenre of pornography called 'revenge porn.' Most of the images of women were uploaded by jealous ex-boyfriends or short-term sexual partners. One goal was to embarrass the women in the images through eroticization of their bodies in a particular context. The gender subordination that occurs is generated entirely from the social and material contexts of the images, and this does not lessen the harm caused by such a vile and shameful display. The images are of women from different parts of Texas, and the website is organized according to the region of the state where the women live. The goal is to allow the woman's friends and neighbors to view the images and pour scorn upon the depicted women. The material context is thus the physical location where the women live, and the social context is the negative attitudes conservative Texans hold for women's bodies and sexual autonomy. Gender subordination is clearly a part of what is going on with the website, but this gender subordination does not come from the content of the images.

Responding to Pornographic Subordination

In the previous section I considered constitutive and causal approaches to pornography, focusing in particular on attempts to explain how pornographic subordination operates. I argued that approaches emphasizing a narrow definition of pornographic content will miss important issues with respect to how pornography's power operates. Where does this leave us? How does pornography's power to subordinate operate? What are some effective ways to respond? I'll argue that it's best to adopt a descriptive definition of pornography and that there's a need to both broaden and sharpen the main claims around pornographic subordination. This will improve our understanding of pornographic subordination and help point the way to helpful responses.

The first claim, then, is that it would be best to adopt a descriptive rather than a normative definition of pornography when discussing the social implications of sexually explicit material. This is to say that it would be best to define pornography, roughly, as any sexually explicit material produced for commercial purposes and generally used for sexual gratification. I make this suggestion for both substantive and pragmatic reasons. Substantively, the sexually explicit materials found in Western culture are incredibly diverse. Considering this diversity opens us to seeing the gaps between pornographic content and subordination. There's a wide variety of banal sexually explicit material that does not subordinate in virtue of its content, but there's also an entire industry of sexually explicit materials aimed at *countering* mainstream pornography. I refer here to feminist pornography, which we will consider shortly. Using a 'big tent' definition of pornography appropriately recognizes these changes. Pragmatically, a descriptive definition better accounts for

the wide variety of experiences people have with pornography and avoids the sort of confusion people have when encountering normative definitions. Once one sees that a wide variety of sexually explicit materials do not subordinate, one is forced to draw the seemingly outlandish conclusion that such materials are not pornography. This will open a rift between theory and reality, particularly among younger people who do not remember the days before the widespread availability of Internet pornography.

Second, I think there's a need to modify the claim that pornography subordinates. In one sense, the claim should be broadened, and in another sense, it should be sharpened. We began with the claim that pornography subordinates women and considered different approaches for fleshing out this claim. But, when discussing an updated version of this claim, I have been careful to address 'gender subordination' in general rather than the 'subordination of women,' specifically. Many of the people subordinated by pornography are transgender, some of whom are women and some of whom are men, nonbinary, or identify in some other way. There's also a need to sharpen the claim, particularly by de-emphasizing pornographic content. Pornography's power to subordinate presupposes prior, broader gender subordination in the cultures in which pornography is produced and viewed. MacKinnon and Langton long ago, as we saw earlier, recognized that pornography is an embodied practice, embedded in a patriarchal culture of gender subordination.[9] Pornography subordinates through changing the sorts of actions, attitudes, and norms that people imbibe as a matter of course. Pornography spurs action, and it does so in ways that are consistent with the cultures in which it is viewed. This is the lesson to be learned from a study of the social and material contexts of pornography, showing us that even identical pornographic content might operate differently depending on the community in which it is viewed. Indeed, pornography need not even depict subordination at all in order to enact gender subordination.

So, what ought we to *do* about pornography? A short and unhelpful answer is that this depends on who we are and what our skills are. But I'll put some focus on some unsuccessful efforts grounded in approaches to pornography I have argued against in this paper and on potentially successful efforts grounded in approaches I argue for. Restricting or regulating pornographic *content*, at least regulating

[9] In personal conversation, Langton suggested that this point may indeed have been lost in subsequent debate. This is probably due to the fact that it was never the main point of the specifically *philosophical* debate over pornography, which concerned some of the questions in the philosophy of language mentioned above.

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pornography qua pornography, looks like an example of a failed response.[10] It's difficult, if not impossible, to draw the sorts of distinctions needed to legislate the bad without unfairly attacking the good or banal. We've also seen that even the "bad" isn't always so bad and that the "good" isn't always so good. Of course, this is not the only reason why many ways of regulating pornography are a bad idea. Regulation depends on state power to write and enforce regulations. In the United States, on which I have the most expertise, the people who would be writing and enforcing legislation are mostly opposed to feminist calls to end subordination and marginalization on the basis of gender. And even the well-intentioned legislator is prone to unintended problems. One's mileage may vary, depending on local conditions. The ultimate authorities here are the people who best know the local conditions and who are victims of gender subordination. But in the United States, a country where regressive attitudes and norms about women are ubiquitous, not to mention the dreadful attitudes and norms about trans* people, the odds of creating a successful state regulatory program that produces positive effects do not look promising.

Approaches to pornography grounded in collective action guided by consciousness-raising, a traditional project of feminists and anarchists, is much more promising. Continuous exploration and criticism of gender norms, and the manifestations of those norms, are particularly important to such approaches. Constitutive and causal critics have done *some* valuable work toward these goals, as have other feminists and cultural critics, but much of what is needed is collective and DIY action. But talk of collection action and consciousness-raising is vague and nebulous. Let's look at concrete examples: feminist and queer pornography. The 2013 anthology *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* explains feminist pornography as a project of using "sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers" (Penley et al. 2013, 9). As discussed earlier, we have some reason to believe that pornography can affect people's attitudes. Feminist pornography uses this causal relationship, turning it toward positive ends. I do not think feminist pornography is a panacea for the ills of

[10] Eaton in particular distinguishes four categories of remedies to the harms of pornography: criminalization, civil action, state regulation that falls short of bans or criminalization, and moral condemnation (Eaton 2007, 690). By claiming that we ought to avoid focus on regulating pornography qua pornography, I mean to say that there are a lot of *other* reasons for regulating pornography (e.g., when the women involved in pornography are trafficked, when nonconsensual sex occurs in filming, etc.). But these are cases when the regulation is not because it's pornography, but rather because there is a social ill taking place.

pornography, but I do think it is time to acknowledge its positive functions. A much more common approach among anti-porn feminists has been to dismiss or ignore feminist pornography (e.g., Dines et al. 2010).

The Internet has revolutionized the pornography industry in many ways, some of which feminist pornographers have used for this positive project. The industry now includes more women-owned and operated pornographic shops, websites, and other media. With the expansion of Internet pornography, the industry's start-up costs are lower and material is less dependent on male-dominated studios and distributors. Some of these newer outlets present a more realistic and positive image of female and transgender bodies and allow to women a space for agency and control. Feminist pornographers connect to a wider network of feminist media, both media outlets like *Bitch* magazine and DIY feminist projects like the Tumblr blog *Hairy Pits Club,*[11] a space on the web for women who violate norms about body hair that tries to be a safe space for these violations of norms. We know that the most effective types of pornography are the ones most 'mainstreamed,' those pornographic outlets that are most continuous with a broader popular culture. Feminist pornography, too, can be effective when it is connected to a broader feminist culture.

What does it mean to say that feminist pornography can be connected to a broader feminist culture? What are feminist pornographers doing to encourage these connections? Many of these connections are educational. The feminist sex shop serves as a safe space where feminists, queers, trans* people, and other marginalized groups can explore their sexual interests. The Smitten Kitten in Minneapolis, for example, is a sex shop that sells a bewildering array of sex toys, focusing in particular on toys for people of marginalized body types and sexualities. The store sells everything from Kegel balls, to BDSM equipment, butt plugs, dildos, lubricants, strap-on harnesses, and special furniture designed to accommodate the sexual positions of people with larger bodies. It pairs this equipment with knowledgeable staff and courses designed to teach people about the different ways they can gain pleasure from sex. The store also sells feminist pornography in DVD format, allowing people to integrate what they are watching with their own bodies and pleasure.

Feminist pornography often focuses directly on sex education, making sure that all actors and actresses demonstrate the proper use of contraceptives and body barriers, equipment designed to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. It's also common for feminist pornographers to engage in direct political education, offering actresses a chance to explain and enact their own political views. The Smitten Kitten, for instance, reserves space for feminist pornography dedicated

[11] http://hairypitsclub.tumblr.com. Last accessed May 18, 2014.

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to the use of vegan-friendly sex toys. Queer pornography has garnered a particularly well-earned reputation for countering body norms and expectations by including trans* participants, cisgender women who disregard norms dictating that women should shave their armpits and legs, and both cisgender and transgender women with larger body types. Of course, the point that non-inegalitarian pornography might promote gender subordination also applies to feminist pornography. Used in the wrong context, apart from its positive or educational contexts, feminist pornography, too, could subordinate. This is no doubt a challenge both to the ability of feminist pornography to secure uptake and to avoid reproducing harms.

We are in an excellent position to say a bit about what is going on in feminist pornography, what it is about feminist pornography that can be effective. People navigate a world where they are classified in their everyday activities. This contributes to gender subordination, leading to gender marginalization. But feminist pornography is, at its core, an attempt to organize people to create a new kind of feedback loop, a feedback loop that generates new expectations and new ways of organizing social life. People are marginalized as a matter of course, but feminist pornographers want to organize people so that they can create a world where people are treated with dignity as a matter of course. Naturally, it's one small part of such a project, but it *is* a part. This is a project with a long, though marginalized, history. It has operated under many names, from anarchism to consciousness-raising to feminism or collective, direct action.

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