

The Sex Wars

Transgressive Politics and the Politics of Transgression

Anti-Pornography and Pro-Sex Perspectives

Carole S. Vance describes the feminist sex wars as “the impassioned, contentious, and, to many, disturbing debates, discussions, conferences and arguments about sexuality that continued unabated until at least 1986” (“More Danger, More Pleasure” xxii), and she remarks that these debates “often explicitly focused on the anti-pornography movement’s fetishized Big Three—pornography, sado-masochism, and butch-femme roles” (xxiii). Mandy Merck, meanwhile, traces the origins of this “period of fabled conflict over the politics of sexual practice” (247) to three specific events: “the 1980 National Organization of Women’s resolution condemning sadomasochism, pornography, public sex and pederasty; the 1981 ‘Sex Issue’ of [the feminist journal] *Heresies*; and the 1982 Barnard conference ‘Towards a Politics of Sexuality’” (247). Although the areas of dispute that came to the fore during the sex wars were in fact fairly numerous, I concentrate primarily on the intense debates that occurred around the issue of pornography. What were the key positions taken on porn? How did these positions use and exploit ideas of transgression and taboo, and what light can they shed on these complex concepts?

The anti-pornography feminism of the sex wars era was, as its name suggests, critical of the role that it believed pornography played in the subjugation of women, and strongly opposed to its continued existence and availability within contemporary society. Porn was perceived as

possessing the power to have a profound and negative effect on the lives of real women, and in 1975, Susan Brownmiller felt moved to set herself against the proponents of the so-called sexual revolution by declaring that “Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition” (38). Many of the most high-profile advocates of the anti-pornography position similarly linked pornography with violence against women. Andrea Dworkin, for example, suggested in 1980 that the “basic action of pornography is rape: rape of the vagina, rape of the rectum, and now, after the phenomenal success of *Deep Throat*, rape of the throat” (“Women Lawyers and Pornography” 238), and she speculated that “the popularity of throat rape in current pornography” might lead to an increase in real deaths from suffocation (238). Although the debates surrounding the effects of pornography on violent behavior are still contentious, ongoing, and inconclusive, Dworkin here invokes the alarming specter of sexual deaths directly initiated by pornographic texts in order to provoke anxiety and to garner support for the anti-porn cause.

However, Dworkin suggests not only that pornography is a potential *trigger* for male sexual violence, but also that pornography is in and of itself a *form* of that violence. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin defines pornography in terms of the “dominance and violence” that she believes it necessarily involves (10), and she argues that sexually explicit visual materials “document a rape, a rape first enacted when the women were set up and used; a rape repeated each time the viewer consumes the photographs” (137). When it comes to pornography, then, not only is its production, like the behavior of its viewers, a near-inevitable site of male violence, but also the very process of looking at and gaining pleasure from a pornographic image is perceived as in itself constituting a form of assault.

If this position seems like an unsophisticated and somewhat extreme analysis of the hermeneutic process and of the relationship between reader and text, even more remarkable is the anti-pornography movement’s simplistic equation of pornography with acts of historical violence. In her analysis of a photo spread originally published in the German edition of *Playboy* magazine, which depicts a racially ambiguous woman with “her ankles manacled, laser beams appearing to penetrate her vagina” (*Pornography* 153), Dworkin explicitly relates soft-core pornographic images to real-life atrocities. She suggests that the photographs, “like all pieces of pornography, do not exist in a historical vacuum. On the contrary, they exploit history—especially historical hatreds and historical suffer-

ing. The witches were burned. The Jews were burned. The laser burns. Jew and woman, *Playboy's* model is captive, bound, in danger of burning" (*Pornography* 143). The images are here unequivocally equated with genocide, and this rhetorical tactic is not exclusive to Dworkin. Catharine A. MacKinnon, another high-profile anti-porn feminist and Dworkin's frequent collaborator, similarly evokes the specter of historical violence and mass death when she suggests that activism against pornography is a form of "resistance to a sexual fascism of everyday life" (23), and that any sexual pleasure generated by the consumption of pornography is akin to "masturbating to the violation of [. . .] human rights" (18).

Anti-pornography activism came to a head with attempts to push through new civil rights ordinances, authored by Dworkin and MacKinnon, in cities such as Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Cambridge, Massachusetts. These controversial local ordinances sought to allow "victims" of pornography to bring a civil action directly in court, and defined pornography as "a form of discrimination on the basis of sex," and as "the sexually explicit subordination of women" ("Minneapolis Ordinance, 1983" 428). They tried to make it possible for people to take "the maker(s), seller(s), exhibitor(s), or distributor(s)" of pornography to court for "Discrimination by trafficking in pornography," "Coercion into pornographic performances," and "Assault or physical attack due to pornography" (429–30). They also were designed to allow "Any woman, man, child, or transsexual who has pornography forced on him/her" to take legal action against "the perpetrator and/or institution" responsible (430). These ordinances were either vetoed by municipal officials in the cities in which they were passed or eventually ruled unconstitutional, but even so, they drew significant attention to MacKinnon and Dworkin's brand of feminism and provoked substantial debate about the issue of pornography within the wider culture.

Located on the other side of the sex wars of the 1980s was the anti-censorship or pro-sex feminist position referred to in my introduction. Perhaps because of the extremely high profile of the anti-pornography feminist movement, much of the pro-sex feminism of this era feels reactive or defensive, with activists and critics directing much of their energy toward agitating specifically against the anti-pornography civil rights ordinances. Nan D. Hunter and Sylvia Law, for example, both members of the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), produced "The FACT Brief" in 1985. This document was expressly designed to

mobilize, in a highly visible way, a broad spectrum of feminist opposition to the enactment of laws expanding state suppression of sexually explicit material; and to place before the Court

of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit a cogent legal argument for the constitutional invalidity of an Indianapolis municipal ordinance that would have permitted private civil suits to ban such material, purportedly to protect women. (207)

Similarly, in the early 1990s, Feminists Against Censorship, a group of British pro-sex activists, produced a slim volume entitled *Pornography and Feminism: The Case Against Censorship*. This pamphlet largely focused on encouraging people to oppose a bill, sponsored by the Labour MP Dawn Primarolo, which was designed to restrict the availability of certain types of sexually explicit material.

In addition to this kind of targeted activism, pro-sex feminists engaged in responding to and refuting the claims of anti-pornography feminism more generally. Carole S. Vance, for example, argued that “Women are vulnerable to being shamed about sex, and the anti-pornography ideology makes new forms of shaming possible” (“Pleasure and Danger” 6). Ellen Willis, meanwhile, suggested, “If feminists define pornography, per se, as the enemy, the result will be to make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them. And the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt, and hypocrisy—this time served up by feminism” (83).

A primary strategy of pro-sex feminist resistance to the anti-porn movement can be found in the presentation of sexually explicit texts as agreeable and politically useful cultural objects, with critics such as Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter, and Carole S. Vance arguing that “Just as the personal can be political, so can the specifically and graphically sexual” (59). One of the key ways in which this foregrounding of porn’s political potential was achieved was via a certain gesturing toward pornography’s radical or transgressive qualities—via an investment in, as Jane Juffer puts it, “inflating the importance of pornography as a transgressive text” (*At Home With Pornography* 34).¹ This is suggested by the frequent invocations of rebellion in the writings of the period. The influential pro-sex activist and “sex radical” Pat (now Patrick) Califia, for example, stated the following in 1986:

Even given the constraints under which it is currently produced, pornography is valuable. It sends out messages of comfort and rebellion. It says: Lust is not evil. The body is not hateful. Physical pleasure is a joyful thing and should not be hidden or denied. It is not true that women have no sexu-

al hunger. There are other people who think about and do the things you dream about. Freedom is possible. There is a choice. (“The Obscene, Disgusting, and Vile Meese Commission Report” 52)

In a similar vein, Willis argues that pornography “expresses a radical impulse” (85) and that “a woman who enjoys pornography (even if that means enjoying a rape fantasy) is in a sense a rebel, insisting on an aspect of her sexuality that has been defined as a male preserve” (85). More recent pornography scholars have picked up this kind of celebratory account of porn, along with all its windy rhetoric. However, as I demonstrate here, this position is largely based on a misconception of, or an uncritical attitude toward, the concept of transgression. Indeed, I suggest that the complex operations and conceptualizations of transgression at work within the feminist sex wars render problematic the seemingly clear-cut division between the pro-sex and anti-pornography positions. These two standpoints, as will become apparent, are not engaged in separate, diametrically opposed political projects, but are in fact both engaged in the same endeavor—that is, in a concerted effort to redeem human sexuality.

The Operations of Transgression Within Pro-Sex Feminism

Although the pro-sex and anti-pornography positions outlined here may appear to be inherently antithetical, they do in fact have more common ground than one might assume. For example, Leo Bersani suggests that Dworkin and MacKinnon’s “most radical claim is [. . .] that so-called normal sexuality is already pornographic,” and he argues that the “ultimate logic” of their critique “would be *the criminalization of sex itself until it has been reinvented*” (“Is the rectum a grave?” 214). He is therefore able to position the anti-pornography strand of the feminist movement within a “more general enterprise, one which I will call the *redemptive reinvention of sex*” (214). I argue that this redemptive urge also can be detected within the work of certain pro-sex feminists.

In her essay “Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure,” Amber Hollibaugh suggests the following:

Feminism must be an angry, uncompromising movement that is just as insistent about our right to fuck, our right to the beauty of our individual female desires, as it is concerned with

the images and structures that distort it. This goal is not an end in itself but a means which will ultimately determine the future and direction of our desires. As feminists, we should seek to create a society limited only by those desires themselves. (409)

Hollibaugh's celebration of the sexual here is forward-looking and future-orientated. The acceptance of desire, passion, and pleasure within the feminist movement is perceived not as "an end in itself," but as the necessary origin of a radically reimagined society and economy of bodily pleasures. We also can see this emphasis on social change within Califia's work, as he claims that

being a sex radical means being defiant as well as deviant. It means being aware that there is something unsatisfying and dishonest about the way sex is talked about (or hidden) in daily life. It also means questioning the way our society assigns privilege based on adherence to its moral codes, and in fact makes every sexual choice a matter of morality. ("Introduction" xii)

Being a sexual dissident, it seems, is not only about violating widely held norms in one's sexual life, but also is about actively and deliberately questioning contemporary society and its values.

Such contributions to the sex wars can be seen as belonging to the "immense body of contemporary discourse that argues for a radically revised imagination of the body's capacity for pleasure" (Bersani, "Is the rectum a grave?" 215). As Bersani argues, this discursive project is in fact predicated on "a certain refusal of sex as we know it, and a frequently hidden agreement about sex as being, in its essence, less disturbing, less socially abrasive, less violent, more respectful of 'personhood' than it has been in a male-dominated, phallogocentric culture" (215).² Both the anti-pornography and pro-sex positions, then, which seem so divided over the issue of sexually explicit material, are in fact engaged in the same kind of redemptive project. Each in its own way rejects sex in its current form as inadequate and insufficiently egalitarian, and anticipates a new sexual world order that is less oppressive to women and vulnerable minorities.

An analysis of these positions in relation to the notion of transgression suggests further unexpected points of crossover. Pro-sex feminism, for example, can be seen as expressing an attitude that, far from embracing

the pornographic, is in fact resistant to its troubling force. Benjamin Noys, in his discussion of the critical response to the often sexually explicit writings of Georges Bataille, suggests, “In an age that so admires excess Bataille has become more and more accepted, even lauded as the prophet of transgression” (*Georges Bataille* 1). The problem with this approach, Noys argues, is that it is actually “a profound *failure* to read Bataille” (1), and an “assimilation and appropriation” of his work (1). By adopting a simplistically laudatory attitude to Bataille’s fiction, then, critics risk “confining” it “by admiration” (5).³ It is easy to see how these insights could be extended and applied more generally to pro-sex feminism. In uncritically celebrating Bataille’s writing, critics are in danger of ignoring or apologizing for its genuinely disturbing qualities, and of effectively resisting its power to disconcert. In other words, when we interpret Bataille’s fiction in such a way that it becomes something thoroughly acceptable to our own personal value systems, we risk restraining, neutralizing, and rehabilitating him. Similarly, in enthusiastically praising the political usefulness of porn’s transgressions—in becoming apologists for porn—pro-sex activists risk confining the troubling force of the pornographic text by rendering it safe. Indeed, as we shall see, it is not only the unsettling potential of sexually explicit representations that is limited and contained by this pro-sex strategy, but the very concept of transgression itself.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for “transgression” defines the word both as “The action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” and as “The action of passing over or beyond.” The difference between these two definitions points to the fact that transgression is not necessarily loaded with the ideological weight of disobedience or rebellion, and can in fact take the form of a relatively neutral act of boundary crossing. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White state, “there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression” (16), and it would therefore “be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness” (201). To position an idea which has, as Noys puts it, “no secure conceptual identity” (*Georges Bataille* 87) as a handy political tool for undoing the effects of patriarchal repression is to underestimate the complexity of that idea and to attempt to impose impossible limits on it. Indeed, we would do well to retain a healthy skepticism when it comes to assessing the radical political potential of Bataille’s model of transgression, not only because, as Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett remark, it “is

at least as much about affirming the status quo as about challenging it" (93), but because the taboos being transgressed need not necessarily be bourgeois, patriarchal, or otherwise oppressive.

In pro-sex feminism, both pornographic representations and the supposedly transgressive force with which they are imbued are reimagined as instruments of social reform and as devices loaded with a politically useful transformative potential. One example of this kind of attitude can be found in Angela Carter's work on the Marquis de Sade (a name, incidentally, that will haunt the margins of this text). Carter writes that "Pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers" (3), and she floats the idea of what she calls the "moral pornographer" (19).⁴ This figure would use "pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes" (19), thereby acting as a friend to the progressive gender political cause. The role of sexual arousal in this type of reconceptualization is, I suggest, frequently ignored, side-lined, and obfuscated in favor of emphasizing porn's potential as a vehicle of social reform.

Although apparently embracing pornography, pro-sex activists and critics are in fact protecting themselves against a regime of representations that, in its current form, is far from a utopian vision of an egalitarian sexual culture to-come. By focusing on the supposedly world-altering transgressive force of pornography, and by attempting to incorporate it into a politically progressive feminist system, the pro-sex approach limits, restrains, and largely ignores the realities of that which it purports to celebrate. I am not necessarily trying to suggest that there is anything wrong with this somewhat disingenuous approach. Instead, I argue that this supposed defense of pornography is in fact a shrewd and subtle form of resistance to it.

In "A Woman Writer and Pornography," an account of her experience researching and producing a book-length study on porn, Andrea Dworkin states:

As a worldly writer—mired in time and meaning, infatuated and obsessed with the muck of real life—I decided that I wanted women to see what I saw. This may be the most ruthless choice I have ever made. But in the privacy of writing, it was the only choice that gave me the pleasure of writing, that greedy, arrogant pleasure: it was the only choice that enabled me to triumph over my subject by showing it, remaking it,

turning it into something that we define and use rather than letting it remain something that defines and uses us. (36)

This remark seems to me to offer as much of an insight into the pro-sex feminist position as it does into Dworkin's mindset and writing practices. In suggesting that attempts to remake and reimagine pornography can allow a writer to "triumph" over the genre, Dworkin unwittingly points toward the underlying, and perhaps unconscious, agenda of the pro-sex feminist stance.

If, as Dworkin suggests, the processes of examination and reinvention make it possible to prevail over the disturbing power of pornography, then the forward-looking, celebratory tendencies of pro-sex feminism, and its attempts to read pornography against the grain and reimagine it as an effective weapon for use against patriarchy, indicate not so much an acceptance of this realm of representations as an attempt to conquer or subdue it. These tendencies can thus be viewed as part of an attempt to obliterate porn as we know it from the cultural landscape—to eradicate it by strategically transforming it. Pro-sex feminism, which is often perceived as working in support of the realm of the pornographic, is therefore revealed as being resistant to contemporary pornography. Indeed, the version of the redemptive project which is enacted by pro-sex feminism has a clear advantage over that which is enacted by the anti-pornography movement, for in appearing to embrace and refusing to condemn pornography, the pro-sex position pragmatically circumvents many of the difficulties which come with attempting to resist an "industry that thrives on its designation as illicit" (Coward 315).

The Operations of Transgression within Anti-Pornography Feminism

Just as, in the case of pro-sex feminism, apparent acceptance can work as a circuitous form of rejection, so condemnation can function as a perverse form of validation or acknowledgment. To return to our exploration of the sex wars, for example, anti-pornography feminism can be shown to be alive to, and indeed productive of, that which it purports to wholeheartedly denounce. Dworkin includes a discussion of *Story of the Eye*, probably Bataille's best-known work, in her study of pornography. She summarizes the entire plot of the erotically charged novel in less than eight pages, and reduces the infamous bullfighting scene to a handful of flat sentences written in the past and present tenses:

They went to numerous bullfights. They fucked in numerous environments, generally surrounded by stink and flies and urine. Simone demands the raw balls of a bull. Sir Edmond provides them. She wants to sit on them but cannot because of all the other people present. Sir Edmond, Simone, and the narrator become horribly excited. Simone bit into one of the raw balls. The bullfighter was killed. As the people screamed in horror, Simone had an orgasm. The bullfighter's eye was dangling from his head. (Dworkin, *Pornography* 173)

Noys remarks that this reading is “violently reductive, breaking down Bataille’s writing into the staging of perverse scenarios,” and argues that the “very violence of this reading and the horrified affect that Dworkin feels before Bataille is, in a strange way, a sort of respect for Bataille’s writing” (*Georges Bataille* 88). That is to say, both despite and because of its condemnatory nature, this anti-pornography response to Bataille’s fiction is in fact more receptive to its troubling and transgressive force than the laudatory readings that openly seek to defend it. Dworkin refuses to rehabilitate the text, claiming that its “language stylizes the violence and denies its fundamental meaning to women, who do in fact end up dead because men believe what Bataille believes and makes pretty: that death is the dirty secret of sex” (*Pornography* 176). She explicitly rejects—and in so doing, inadvertently foregrounds—the novel’s disruptive affective power, its cultural significance, and its ability to produce effects in the extra-textual social world.

Of course, Bataille and Dworkin are in fact in agreement about what constitutes “the dirty secret of sex”; Dworkin, too, feels that eroticism in its current form connects all too easily with violence and death, and that pornography clearly demonstrates the fact “that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and sexual passion in the privacy of the male imagination are inseparable from the brutality of male history” (*Pornography* 69). As Noys points out, however, her “desire to categorize and condemn, to draw up firm boundaries and taboos, at once makes her feel the violence of transgression more and fail to appreciate the porous boundary between her own work and Bataille’s” (*Georges Bataille* 88).

Similarly, anti-pornography feminism’s creation and shoring up of certain taboos surrounding pornography can be seen as a perversely hospitable attitude toward the very realm of representations that it explicitly wishes to denounce. As I mentioned in my introduction to this section, it

has been frequently and convincingly argued that transgression is inextricably linked to the forbidden, because it depends on that which it violates and “suspends a taboo without suppressing it” (Bataille, *Eroticism* 36). This notion of the interconnectedness of taboo and transgression has a long and auspicious history that stretches back many centuries before Bataille. Saint Paul, for example, explored similar ideas in his writings. As the New Testament scholar E.P. Sanders remarks, Paul maintains that “the purpose of the law is to provoke sin or to condemn all of humanity” (99), because this condemnation works to facilitate God’s eventual salvation of mankind through Christ. In other words, the Apostle felt that “God himself had intended that the world be enslaved to Sin, so that he could save it” (Sanders 49), and therefore believed that the law had been handed down to mankind less because God wished it to be exactly and dutifully followed, than because He knew it would be broken and violated. God’s law, then, was in fact designed to produce its own transgressions, and, as Alain Badiou puts it, its taboos can therefore be seen as “that through which the desire of the object can realize itself ‘involuntarily,’ unconsciously—which is to say, as life of sin” (*Saint Paul* 80).

Pauline thought demonstrates that the taboo has long been understood as generating the transgression that challenges or suspends it, and as provoking a desire for the very thing that it expressly forbids. We might therefore be prompted to question the efficacy of the anti-pornography movement’s establishment of various “new feminist taboos” surrounding sexuality (Webster 387). In an article first published in 1982, Paula Webster examines the women’s movement’s recent history, and suggests that anti-pornography feminism’s “list of taboos marked off more and more unacceptable terrain. ‘Perverse’ pleasures, like voyeurism, bondage, s/m, fetishism, pornography, promiscuity, and intergenerational, group, interracial, public or phone sex were presented as incomprehensible” (386). Bearing in mind “Paul’s insight into how the prohibitive law creates sin” (Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 15), this condemnatory attitude would appear to be a somewhat self-defeating political strategy. If the “law is required in order to unleash the automatic life of desire, the automatism of repetition. For only the law *fixes* the object of desire, binding desire to it regardless of the subject’s ‘will’” (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 79), then the anti-pornography movement, in setting up firm taboos around certain sexual practices, could be seen as inadvertently provoking the activities that it attempts to resist. The political activism of Dworkin and her colleagues risks simply creating more norms to violate, as well as rejuvenating something of the compelling aura of illicitness surrounding sexuality.

Indeed, we can find evidence of the unintended consequences of anti-pornography activism in some of the sexually explicit material produced during the period of the sex wars. Several of the texts that Dworkin analyses in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* can be seen as exploiting feminism and the figure of the feminist in order to produce an erotic charge. In her interpretation of the pornographic novel *Whip Chick*, for example, Dworkin notes that the “dangerous female, now called an amazon or liberated woman, is ever present, ready to take over if the male lets up in his cruelty at all” (34), and she suggests that the book “targets feminists as the subgroup of women most threatening to male power, most in need of abusive, humiliating sexual treatment” (36). She also mentions a magazine feature “called ‘The Art of Dominating Women.’” It consists of four black-and-white photographs and a ‘case history’ with an introduction by a ‘Dr.’” (160). She reports that this text, too, makes explicit mention of feminism; “The doctor explains that with the growth of the women’s movement more men than usual seem to be sexually submissive but, never fear, the male will never give up or lose his role of leadership” (161).

Dworkin herself—as perhaps the most iconic representative of anti-pornography feminism—was also mentioned or depicted in pornographic works of the period. Indeed, in 1984 a “suit was brought against *Hustler* magazine for publishing features displaying Andrea Dworkin in a derogatory manner” (Nussbaum 142). These included references to Dworkin in cartoons depicting lesbian sexual acts and in captions for photographs featuring lesbianism and the fat female body. Martha C. Nussbaum opines that the “morally salient issue in the case [. . .] is one of harm, humiliation, and subordination. Dworkin is being treated as a plaything of male fantasies of humiliation and domination; in retaliation for her feminist criticism of men, *Hustler* is taking pleasure in portraying her as both disgusting and contemptible” (143). This may well be the case, but it seems to me that the pleasure of representing or encountering Andrea Dworkin within the pages of a pornographic magazine may also be a matter of self-consciously evoking the specter of feminist censure.

Hustler was, after all, a frequent target of Dworkin’s ire—the publication provides the first of the examples that she subjects to close analysis in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*—and we can therefore suggest that, in portraying Dworkin, the magazine is deliberately foregrounding its status as transgressive, renegade, and oppositional. This is not to suggest, of course, that there is anything politically progressive about the pornographic appropriation of Dworkin’s persona; *Hustler*’s use of her name

is an unsettling and deliberate attack on an individual by a corporation. As this section endeavors to illustrate, however, there is no *essentially* revolutionary aspect to any violation of taboos, and to say that *Hustler's* actions are transgressive is simply to note that it self-consciously acts in an unseemly and inappropriate manner—by turning an anti-pornography campaigner into porn. It would seem that Dworkinite feminism, as a source of new standards of respectful and appropriate sexual behavior, inadvertently produces new prohibitions and therefore new possibilities for pornographers. Bataille suggests, “the essence of eroticism is to be found in the inextricable confusion of sexual pleasure and taboo. In human terms the taboo never makes an appearance without suggesting sexual pleasure, nor does the pleasure without evoking the taboo” (*Eroticism* 108). If we accept this argument, then to invent new sexual taboos is at the same time to generate at least the possibility of their pleasurable violation.⁵

This complex relationship of taboo and transgression means that the boundary between pornography and the political activism that seeks to resist it can sometimes seem remarkably fragile. Catherine MacKinnon has noted, for example, that the testimony of one of the women who spoke against pornography in the Minneapolis civil rights hearings “was published by *Penthouse Forum* without her knowledge or permission, selling her assault for sexual use” (12). Indeed, MacKinnon’s work itself often has been seen as venturing perilously close to that which it most despises. Parveen Adams and Mark Cousins remark of *Only Words*—MacKinnon’s study of pornography and hate speech—that “several reviews and comments have been struck by the appearance of passages in the book which are ‘pornographic’” (63). This seems true also of Dworkin’s readings of sexually explicit texts, which, in reducing pornography to its supposed essence in the humiliation and abuse of women, risk transforming works of conventional pornography into brutally erotic pieces of flash fiction. Harriet Gilbert has made a similar point about the proximity of Dworkin’s writing to pornography. Discussing the polemical and autobiographical novel *Mercy*, which includes numerous depictions of rape and degradation, Gilbert notes that Dworkin at times adopts the “formal and imaginative language” of pornography (227). The prologue and epilogue “attempt to make it clear that *Mercy* should be read not for sexual excitement but as part of a feminist debate” (219), but as Gilbert remarks, “these context-providers (which would in any case make little sense to anyone unfamiliar with internecine sisterhood) occupy six of the novel’s 344 pages” (219). She is thus prompted to question whether or not the

text is in fact “prevented from being pornographic by its author’s polemical bookends” (219).

An analysis of the feminist pornography debates demonstrates the ability of transgression to disrupt order and ideological position in numerous complex and unexpected ways. When one attempts to use transgression as a political tool, as pro-sex feminism sometimes does, one attempts to impose impossibly rigid limits upon what is in fact an endlessly mobile “a-concept” (Noys, *Georges Bataille* 87). It cannot, I suggest, be so easily pinned down and put to use. Following Bataille and Paul, transgression must be understood as the inevitable by-product of any attempt to impose order—as that which exceeds or disrupts a given system. It makes its presence felt in contradictions and disconnections—in the disavowed disavowal of sex that underpins an apparently celebratory account of sexuality, or in the resistance to pornography that is the hidden foundation of an ostensibly pro-porn position; in the respect for the disturbing power of the pornographic that lies beneath a horrified rejection, or in the invitation to transgress that comes with the enforcement of rigid taboos.

In the next chapter, I discuss the critical reception of a recent novel—Charlotte Roche’s controversial and sexually explicit *Wetlands*—in order to consider how the contemporary association of pornography with transgression draws on the legacy of the feminist sex wars. I argue that it relies on a certain erroneous conceptualization of pornography as a straightforwardly dissident realm positioned in opposition to mainstream culture, and suggest that, in its own way, it represents another attempt to limit transgression. I also sketch out some of the ways in which contemporary discourses of pornography and transgression gesture toward an expanded understanding of the pornographic, and begin to consider the role of affect and the displacement of sex within current understandings of this concept.