

# Pornographic Altruism, or, How to Have Porn in a Pandemic

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## I. Thinking Beyond Pleasure

“What good can porn do?” is a complicated question. One might suppose *pleasure* is the natural by-product and virtue of pornography, but pleasure is neither a uniform nor singular experience, and treating it as such obscures its beneficiary, structure, and function. Thinking beyond pleasure, this analysis seeks to address the “good” of pornography through its labour. Historically, Marxist thought minimized the question of sexuality, which it designated to the realm of leisure and domesticity, and therefore separate from the exploitation of labour and place of work.<sup>1</sup> But feminist theorists have dismantled this neat division between work and “play,” noting that sexuality was in fact work (and largely women’s work) that was integral to the act of social reproduction, and that this labour was alienated, as well. The result of such alienation and compulsion to perform in a narrowly prescribed manner made the cultural emphasis on a supposed pleasure a fraught one, at best (see Frederici 2012). While I do not claim that sexuality and pornography are the same thing, in the case of pornography we can begin to ask how the current production, marketing, and distribution of sexual labour seeks to redress exploitation and enact altruism, even as it always remains firmly moored in the logic of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> When viewed against the current backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant economic crisis, this inquiry gains heightened salience.

The question of pornography’s goodness is neither easy nor obvious to answer, and it should go without saying that this approach is but one among many. In addition to being difficult to answer, it is rarer still to ask. Indeed, the dominant cultural refrain from an Anglo-American perspective has been centered for decades on this question’s negation: “What *harm* does pornography do?” But *harm* is not a static concept, either, and has, in fact, undergone a transformation of sorts: initially, the question of harm centered on misogyny and violence,<sup>3</sup> but increasingly, harm has manifested as a public health crisis.<sup>4</sup> Harm’s transformation from behaviouralism to concrete physicality tracks with the biopolitical imperative of self-care and the Neoliberal refashioning of subjectivity (see Patton 1996, 118–38; Waugh 2000, 233). This focus on the body can lend specificity to the search for pornographic “goodness” by orienting this inquiry to the sphere of public health. In other words, we can whittle away at the question of a pornographic goodness to arrive at a narrower question: “How can porn promote health and what does that health look like?”

The Covid-19 emergency has exacerbated structural inequalities across the world, so it comes as no surprise that the pornography industry would find itself both challenged by *and* impelled to make tangible interventions. This is not, after all, the first time that pornography has been confronted with a pandemic. At the start of the AIDS pandemic, pornography taught its consumers safe(r) sex. Film scholar Thomas Waugh (2000) and sociologist Cindy Patton (1996) have shown that, while not uniformly, segments of the gay porn industry were among the first cultural responders to the virus, against the backdrop of an immobilized United States.

The dilemma for pornography at the onset of the AIDS crisis was how to negotiate titillation with education. This question was already circulating more broadly through Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen's famous pamphlet "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic," which, while surprisingly not interested in porn, did endeavor to alter gay men's sexual behavior by "limiting what sex acts you choose to perform to ones which interrupt disease transmission."<sup>5</sup> Despite their often homonormative stance, which Douglas Crimp takes to task in "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,"<sup>6</sup> Berkowitz and Callen can be credited with initiating a franker discussion of sexuality and its relation to disease. As a result, gay video porn from this era began adopting heightened condom visibility and tutorials, among other safe sex practices,<sup>7</sup> in effect elevating pedagogy to a prominent function of pornography. The political organization Men's Gay Health Crisis commissioned and disseminated pornographic comix [sic] that taught safer sex practices, to the dismay of Senator Jesse Helms (see Greenblatt 2019). My own research (2019) has shown the increase in popularity of phone sex during the 1980s, which, as the first pornographic network, provided an alternative medium for fantasy making and sexual release. In short, the AIDS pandemic necessitated that pornographic purveyors reassess their content's *raison d'être*—the carefree delivery of pleasure—alongside the careful(l) delivery of information. In other words, this moment demanded that pornographers yolk the "realism" of disease prevention with the "fantasy" of unencumbered sexual expression that may seem anathema to one another, but the two can and do find complementarity. This is not to say pornography became less pleasurable—although cultural critic Daniel Harris argues AIDS transformed its function from aphrodisiac to voyeuristic replacement (1997, 131)—but that pornography, as it so often does, responded to the cultural crisis of its time by incorporating it into its very logic.<sup>8</sup> In short, porn was not just about pleasure, nor has it ever only been so.

In what follows, I track how contemporary pornographers have responded to the health crisis of Covid-19 through the emergence of mutual aid, the expansion of rigorous health guidelines, and the rise of a genre of charity porn, and ask to what degree we can say one of pornography's uses is the promotion of health. Maintaining a skeptical perspective, I seek to articulate care's many forms, the possibility of virtue signaling, and what may ultimately be nothing more than cynical marketing.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Production: Mutual Aid and Covid-19 Health Guidelines

The response of the pornography industry today has been swifter to act to protect performers and viewers alike, which, I speculate, derives from Covid-19 not being stigmatized as a “gay disease,” as AIDS was.<sup>10</sup> When Covid-19 began spreading across North America in the early spring of 2020, sex workers more broadly, and the pornography industry specifically, began to form networks of care and support. Additionally, the trade organization Free Speech Coalition quickly set up fundraising efforts and distributed revised health guidelines. Since the 1990s, the FSC has overseen the national testing sites for pornographic performers and recently formed an economic relief fund to assist those who have been unable to work since March 15, 2020. This organization originated from the erstwhile Adult Film Association of America in 1969 in response to Lyndon B. Johnson’s Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Their original mission centered on guaranteeing porn performers, filmmakers, and distributors legal remedy against charges of obscenity and indecency. More recently, as fears around pornography have shifted to public health, The Free Speech Coalition has been vocal about legislation in California that has sought to regulate the porn industry like Measure B and Proposition 60, which hoped to mandate condom usage and even allow residents the opportunity to sue performers for failing to do so.<sup>11</sup>

While The Free Speech Coalition has fundraised for the pornography industry specifically, very few performers have been able to sustain their livelihoods through pornography alone, and often performers require supplemental income. Many, in fact, must work in what Heather Berg (2016) has termed “satellite industries,” or alternative revenue streams that include strip clubs, escort services, and webcamming. Without these satellite industries, the vast majority of performers could not survive on porn work alone, and vice versa. Covid-19 has spurred sex workers to develop mutual aid efforts across the United States to deliver much needed resources to peers through its decentralized fundraising (Herrera 2020). Jack Herrera has reported on mutual aid programs in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York, and elsewhere that have banded together to redistribute money to sex workers suddenly finding themselves out of work. Innovation has been another less widespread but still potent tool. For instance, in Portland, a strip club adopted a “drive-thru” model after previously deploying their dancers to deliver food through the punnily titled Boober Eats (Russo 2020). These efforts give a glimpse into the creativity and collectivism that have made sex work possible, even before the pandemic began to jeopardize this labour. Operating at the margins of the economy, sex workers in the United States fall outside of government safety networks, which structurally withhold services and benefits to them. And it is not just governments that deny services to them. Jiz Lee and Rebecca Sullivan (2016) remind us that for many sex workers, financial institutions have penalized if not outright forbidden their services to labourers in the sex industry.

The methodology behind disbursement of mutual aid in the case of sex workers, though, presents challenges when it comes to uniform, egalitarian distribution. Mutual aid is not charity. In fact, mutual aid’s philosophy seeks to dissolve the underlying power imbalances of charity, which its proponents argue reproduce

inequality in the form of a donor class that determines to whom money is given, how much, and for what purpose. In theory, this positions mutual aid within a liberation politics, but in practice it often still requires difficult pragmatism, and it has been no small task to determine precisely which performers to support and how much aid to grant. Jack Herrera explains:

Deciding who gets aid takes many forms. Organizers have said they take into account whether workers have the option of taking on web-based work, like cam work or porn. Sex workers explain that this sort of transition is often difficult on not just a practical level—they may have no WiFi or private space to work out of—but also on a mental health level, as the separation between work and life shrinks. They also note if people are supporting children or other dependents. (Herrera 2020)

Taken at face value, cam work would seem to be the last bastion of sex work relatively unscathed by Covid-19, and, if available to sex workers, a precluding factor for some mutual aid groups. But as Herrera nuances, multiple circumstances must factor into consideration. Additionally, Heather Berg (2016) has pointed out that camming largely operates in an ecosystem of sexual labour, which commonly requires more traditional porn work to market cam work, and vice versa. The question of camming's profitability outside of this symbiotic relation remains unclear. While pre-taped pornographic scenes and videos have not disappeared entirely, their reduction has presented another roadblock for cross-promotion.<sup>12</sup> In short, the camming side of pornography may appear "pandemic-proof," but with the rise in unemployment, many who have never even considered themselves sex workers are contemplating joining this gig economy. A good example of this phenomenon and its backlash can be seen in the recent doxxing of a New York paramedic who joined OnlyFans to supplement her income (Frias 2020). This potential increase in performers threatens to further saturate and dilute the market, making the profitability of such labour all the more uncertain.

The rise of mutual aid within the pornography industry highlights the continued "outlaw" status of sex work today, but collective assistance is not novel to this moment as much as it is accelerated. Collectivism has long been a feature of the industry. Pornographers have always been problem solvers because pornography has rarely been seen as anything other than a cultural problem. Recent legislation like FOSTA-SESTA displaced sex workers from using craigslist and ousted pornographic bloggers from Tumblr, which had become a safe haven for queer and trans youth (see Cho 2015; Valens 2020). Additionally, various condom ban initiatives in California sought to limit where and how sexually explicit material could be made and distributed, and in one case, to offer viewers the legal right to sue performers who did not abide by them (Chappel 2016). While the latter, Proposition 60, did not pass, FOSTA-SESTA did. These examples give a glimpse into the recent legislative efforts to regulate online sexual media as though it only produces harm, claiming to protect the public from sexual trafficking and sexual health threats. As independent contractors, porn performers have been denied the ability to file for unemployment at any time, not just during the recent pandemic and production moratorium. Nontraditional kinship networks have, by

necessity, always been a source of relief to these workers, who face discrimination and structural violence with alarming consistency.<sup>13</sup>

While equitable pay is paramount to the safety of porn performers, so too are effective health protocols. In terms of the latter, the pornography industry has been leading the charge on safe sex since the 1990s. Indeed, several health experts begrudgingly admit that the pornography industry offers a proactive model to emulate for reopening other industries. Michele C. Hollow reported in the *New York Times* that porn teaches us the “four Ts”: Target, Test, Treat and Trace. These protocols hail from the aforementioned Free Speech Coalition, which sought to keep porn performers safe from HIV transmission through the development of the PASS system. On June 12, 2020, these guidelines were updated to include Covid-19 precautions, which recommend studios frequently test performers, enact temperature checks, require masks on set when not filming, limit crew and when possible, and use performers who live together for shoots, among other recommendations.<sup>14</sup> Scholars and health clinicians laud these guidelines but note that stigma may limit their broader implementation. This hesitation to adopt similar measures, or to do so without acknowledgement of the pornography industry’s leadership, reveals just how entrenched moralism is to notions of public health. For instance, one recent publication went so far as to question whether the global lockdowns and stay-at-home orders might accelerate an often-feared porn addiction crisis, while ignoring at the same time the many safety protocols that the industry has implemented proactively (Kearns 2020).

So long as the proactive health guidelines and practices of pornography as an industry remain relegated to the status of insider knowledge (something that is done off camera and “behind the scene”), their utility and influence will remain obscured, but visibility of such practices within the diegesis of pornography may be one way to promote safety measures. That said, just as pornographers in the 1980s were conflicted over how to render visible “safe(r) sex” within their videos’ narratives, so too studios will need to decide how manifest Covid-19 safety procedures should be. One could easily imagine mask usage being incorporated into pornographic scenes, but would their absence denote risk? Just as “bareback pornography” emerged out of widespread condom usage, one could imagine a future in which scenes of maskless sex could lead to the fetishization of risk for Covid-19 transmission.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, on many tube sites, “coronavirus” and “Covid-19” are trending in searches, but what that looks like in terms of depiction is less uniform (Sachdeva 2020). Sometimes a mask is worn, or isolation serves as an inciting incident, but for the most part, dispensing health recommendations does not appear to be a priority. Perhaps the audio-visual arena of pornography is ill-suited to deliver Covid-19 safety measures as a story line. Intriguingly, some written erotica has taken up the challenge to narrate precisely this moment.<sup>16</sup> This observation suggests a disparity between pornography the production (industry) and pornography the representation (narrative). But there is another arena where health finds promotion beyond the diegesis of porn, and that is through distribution and marketing.

### III. Distribution and Marketing: Charity Porn

“Charity porn” is a relatively recent moniker for an admittedly older practice: raising funds for a “good cause” by selling sexually explicit content. “Charity porn” is pornography you can feel good about because it comes prepackaged as an ethical act. The commodity—the adult content—has what we might call the “value added” feature of altruism in addition to that which typically comes from pornography: the pleasure of self indulgence. Any stigma that normally attaches to the act of viewing pornography may be balanced—or even outweighed—by the good deed that such spectatorship facilitates. This phenomenon derives from a longer lineage of media than the present moment might suggest, and precursors include glossy pin-up calendars of scantily clad models, with profits going to an endless supply of humanitarian disasters. A more recent example can be found in Kaylen Ward, who put charity porn on the map with her viral Twitter campaign to send nudes to all who donated to the Australian Fire Relief Fund. Soon after, other copycat charity porn fundraisers followed. Ward repeated her own campaign but through a different website and cause, using an OnlyFans account to raise money for earthquake relief to Puerto Rico (Kibbe 2020). Ward’s transformation from a non-professional model to for-hire pornographer mirrors the same genre trajectory of amateur porn stars, who rely on an initial anonymous status, unassuming aesthetic, and word-of-mouth virality to market their desirability.

The rise of charity porn, though, need not be thought of as only an amateur endeavor. In fact, it finds a similar, albeit corporate, expression in the case of Pornhub, the premier tube site of global conglomerate Mindgeek. In April 2012, Pornhub launched the “Pornhub Cares” initiative on their website, which sought to raise money for various humanitarian endeavors (largely through viewership), ranging from increased research for testicular and breast cancers (nominally adjacent concerns of pornography, as they are fetishized and/or eroticized body parts), to recent efforts to save bees and clean the ocean of littered plastics. Like clockwork, the positive press Pornhub received for these fundraisers was almost immediately met with scrutiny and in some cases outcry. Critics went so far as to call upon the benefactors of these efforts to refuse or return donations, claiming the money was tainted by its association with pornography and invoking longstanding allegations of sexual abuse and trafficking to further discredit the donations.<sup>17</sup>

While not featured under the banner of “Pornhub Cares,” Pornhub’s “Stay at Home” initiative launched shortly at the start of the Covid-19 outbreak with the mission to incentive quarantine by granting viewers access to their premium subscription service free for one month. Pornhub rolled this initiative out first in Italy and later in other regions of the world especially hard-hit by the virus (Turak 2020). In addition, Pornhub donated 50,000 PPE to Italy and later to New York. Furthermore, they donated to the Free Speech Coalition’s fund for out-of-work performers. The question remains whether such donations made any tangible effects on the pandemic, or whether they acted merely as virtue signaling—here, the rehabilitation of the now classic refrain that pornography is a social ill by expressly positioning it as a social good—to serve their bottom line, but it might

be the case that both were well-served. Unlike the charity porn outlined before, these Pornhub examples do not rely on purchase or viewership to spur relief efforts, but rather the charity precedes spectatorship and is seemingly separate from it. Despite their differences, what links each of these examples of charity porn is an invocation of altruism and the promise of its material effectuation. The goodwill Pornhub earns becomes a dominant marketing tool for the website, but the material consequence of that tool has its limits. Repeat viewership of Pornhub does not increase how much PPE is distributed nor does premium access to Pornhub have the surveillant power to keep its viewers at home, but one could claim that this form of commodity altruism does further codify the public health protocols surrounding Covid-19's containment.

Pornhub and the innumerable other tube sites have dominated pornographic distribution in large part because they are free. Certainly, some could pay for their premium services, but for most, an endless collection of pornographic content could just as easily be accessed for the price of wifi and a connected device. The free-ness of porn online—perhaps the paragon of the gift economy<sup>18</sup>—was not always a given, especially not at the start of the public Internet. In fact, the pop-up advertisement was an idiosyncratic marketing innovation developed in the 1990s to monetize websites without fear of associating products directly with porn.<sup>19</sup> Since 2008, the lawful purchase of porn has diminished precipitously.<sup>20</sup> Revenue is driven largely through advertisements and pirated content, which has had striking effects on individual performers, who are hired at will and with increasingly diminished pay scales. These performers navigate what we might colloquially call “the pornosphere” by harnessing multiple income streams that then maximize viewership. This has given rise to what Sophie Pezutto (2019) rightly calls the “porntropreneur,” or, the increasingly savvy porn entrepreneur who markets and monetizes their performance across a host of social media and amateur adult platforms since studio porn alone no longer pays the bills.

What holds “value” to the consumer must be viewed in relation to and as a result of tube sites disseminating endless free porn clips. The development of amateurism was a direct confrontation with the perceived inauthenticity and hegemony of mainstream pornography. Amateur pornography emerged in the 1990s and followed a path similar to celebrity sex videos.<sup>21</sup> These videos garnered notoriety and success for their subjects because they appeared authentic. Amateur pornography today, though, can be seen almost exclusively through the lens of the gig economy: cam shows and patron sites sell subscriptions to the porn performers themselves, who produce their own content. The amateur in this sense operates as an alternative to the monopolistic studio system, allowing the performer themselves to set their price and market their work as they see fit. They keep the bulk of their intake, too, except for the platform on which such content is hosted.<sup>22</sup> Media scholar Daniel Laurin notes that, in addition to promoting the notion of authenticity to viewers, sites that run on a model of “subscription intimacy” forward the neoliberal idea that economic responsibility falls to the individual, not the state: “OnlyFans appeared to be another tool that called on individuals to take it upon themselves to solve the larger structure problems

facing the porn industry, including fewer scenes and lower scene rates” (Laurin 2019, 73).

Gay porn star Bruce Beckham has appeared in several studio porn videos, and, like so many, he also has an OnlyFans account. In April of 2020 he advertised on Twitter that 100% of his OnlyFans subscription fees would be donated to Covid-19 relief (GayVN 2020). Through a blog entry posted to Str8UpGayPorn on April 9, 2020, Beckham was quoted verifying his donation of \$2,740 to The Center for Disease Philanthropy. This money went toward stocking food banks and purchasing PPE, he wrote, noting he “thought it was important to represent the porn community as philanthropic and invested in giving back, as the sex industry is often stigmatized” (Beckham 2020). Beckham’s statement makes explicit what I have so far merely speculated, that the negative affects surrounding pornography are a strong motivating factor for pornographers who utilize their platforms for charity. In effect, Beckham sublimates any anxiety of the commodity of pornography by re-imbuing it with new value.

Slavoj Žižek writes of a similar phenomenon in the purchase of a cup of coffee from Starbucks that advertises a portion of the cost goes to charity:

You had to do something to counteract your pure destructive consumerism.... What Starbucks enables is to be a consumerist without any bad conscience because the price for the countermeasure—of fighting consumerism—is already included into the price of the commodity.... You pay a little bit more, and you are not just a consumerist, but you do also your duty towards [the] environment, the poor starving people in Africa, and so on and so on. It’s, I think, the ultimate form of consumerism. (Žižek 2014)

While Žižek may overestimate the bad conscience most people experience when purchasing coffee, the argument he makes seems custom-made for pornographic consumption. Pornography has always been a “bad object,” so in this case, the built-in countermeasure allows the viewer to rehabilitate the ill health porn is often accused of fomenting. Pornographer Tristan Taormino theorizes feminist porn in a similar vein, writing that it is an attempt to “counteract the messages we get from society that can be reflected in mainstream porn: sex is shameful, naughty, dirty, scary, dangerous, or it’s the domain of men, where only their desires and fantasies get fulfilled” (2013, 261). This filiation with feminist porn and charity porn goes deeper; beyond its counter narratives, feminist porn has always placed a fair and ethical work environment at the center of its praxis. Charity porn, then, may more accurately be described as participating in the same ameliorative structure of the now nearly four-decade long endeavor of feminist porn.

#### IV. How to Have Porn in a Pandemic

If the proprietary data are to be believed, statistical analysis of pornographic usage can offer a glimpse into what surely at one point in history would have been a ridiculous question: what is the relationship between porn spectatorship and impending death? On January 13, 2018, Hawaiian residents were greeted at 8:07AM by a text message alerting them that a ballistic missile was thought

to be inbound and to take immediate shelter. Similar to the panic that ensued from Orson Welles's fictionalized radio broadcast "War of the Worlds," many Hawaiians feared for the worst. At 8:45AM, though, these same residents were sent a second text message rescinding the first warning, which, it turns out, had been made in error. Government mea culpas aside, this fleeting terror offered a curious social experiment for analysts of pornography. "Pornhub Insights" is the data analysis branch of Pornhub, and it frequently tracks trends among users' habits, presenting periodical blogs that report on what regions of the country were searching for "MILF porn," among other enlightening search queries. The Hawaiian alert scandal did not escape their attention. Four days after the Hawaiian ballistic attack scare, Pornhub Insights released the following post, with accompanying graphic:

By 8:23am, traffic was a massive -77% below that of a typical Saturday. As residents were notified around 8:45 that the initial warning was sent in error, traffic began to return to normal and Hawaiians collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Those seeking further relief, headed back to Pornhub where pageviews surged +48% above typical levels at 9:01am. (Pornhub 2018)

Given these data, we can presume that many Hawaiians perceived themselves to be facing imminent death. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when people find themselves approaching the big death, they do not seek out *la petite mort*. Upon learning that they had cheated death, though, Hawaii residents flooded Pornhub, sending a massive spike in porn searches. I note the speed of perceived demise because the emergency in Hawaii lasted for thirty-eight minutes. What, though, is the relationship of pornographic viewership to a sense of death that lingers?

At the time of this essay's writing, the necropolitics of Covid-19 can be thought of through what Lauren Berlant calls "slow death."<sup>23</sup> In part, we have become habituated to the existential threat that lurks everywhere, and complacent to the rising death toll from the coronavirus.<sup>24</sup> Living in a state of near constant emergency—as normalized as this experience has become—has elongated and stretched out the anxiety associated with it, effectively domesticating it. In living with the threat of a constant lurking virus, demise either loses its terror, or finds its expression elsewhere. While the sudden onset and revocation of the Hawaiian ballistic attack scare resulted in the dramatic reduction and then escalation of porn viewership, the slow death associated with Covid-19 has produced a more incremental effect on porn consumption after the initial spike from the first lock-downs. Whether pornography serves as escapism or antidote, what has also become abundantly clear during this period from the data on pornographic usage is that its viewership has been on the rise since the pandemic first began to surge. With many people working remotely, and still more furloughed and out of work, the pandemic is looking more and more like a *porndemic* (Higgins 2020).

Porn and the workplace have always shared a complicated relationship, but not an incompatible one. GIFs (Flatt 2017) and #NSFW (Paasonen et al. 2019) hashtags provide users with discreet options for partaking in adult content at work, mitigating risk and reprimand. For the increasing segment of the population that

now works remotely from home, clandestine consumption of pornography finds its limits not from the threat of being caught by the boss so much as by what time the zoom call is scheduled or when one's fellow inhabitants are home.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the pandemic has further strained the distinction between work and leisure, because the space of work has been mapped onto the space that traditionally defined leisure. Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that productivity at most companies has taken a net reduction of between 3 to 6%, although this assessment fails to fully account for the manner in which these corporations also benefit from utilizing the private resources—water, electricity, buildings, technology, etc.—of their employees (see Garton and Mankins 2020).

If pornography is going to exist in the future, and there seems to be no reason to imagine that it would not,<sup>26</sup> Covid-19 will serve as an important inflection point, just as 2008 did for the adult industry. In 2008, on the heels of the (then) Great Recession and the advent of Web 2.0—that awkward term for when we “discovered” the internet could be interactive and user-generated—tube sites emerged as the dominant distributor of online pornography. This model of pornographic dissemination rested almost entirely on piracy and user uploads, but it also resulted in the monopolistic rise of conglomerate MindGeek, which eventually vertically integrated itself by purchasing several of the very porn studios it previously pilfered content from.

So what will pornography look like in 2021 and beyond? The desire for pornography is now more amplified than ever, and while the voluntary production hold has been lifted by the Free Speech Coalition, whether performers will feel comfortable returning to traditional studio porn or not remains an open question. Even if they do, fewer and fewer performers can make a living by studio porn alone. Camming, though, continues undaunted, and appears to be the future of porn. The epitome of gig economy work, its amateur performers make their own hours and charge their own rates that are listed upfront. With the rise of even more exclusive subscription fee sites like OnlyFans and JustForFans, performers can parlay fame on cam sites like chaturbate or cam4 to a platform where they can offer more personalized, intimate, and subsequently lucrative content.<sup>27</sup> These sites were early to integrate charity into their business models, too, with OnlyFans adding a fundraising target feature in March of 2020. As a result, these sites illustrate their goodness at the levels of production, distribution, and marketing in a kind of radical rebuke to the notion of pornographic harm.

The porn performer has always been an independent contractor, but Covid-19 has hastened sex workers to be even more creative and caring. Care, of course, is a foundational element of this labour, but typically that care was only directed toward the viewer. Today, networks of care extend to fellow cammers and beyond. If giving back by donating portions of shows or subscription fees to fight Covid-19 (and, increasingly, to support the Black Lives Matter movement) brings visibility to the care work that porn has always been, then one can hope that this increased visibility will compel viewers to treat porn performers with increased care, too, which in this case, would mean paying them equitably for their labour. But even while one can hope for a more egalitarian pornographic economy to

emerge, major credit cards have recently announced a boycott of Pornhub content creators (Associated Press 2020). Following Nick Kristof's op-ed column in the *New York Times* alleging abuse and sex trafficking on Pornhub, the major tube site has taken the drastic measure of deleting all unverified accounts, resulting in the erasure of a broad swath of amateur performers' content in the process (see Grant 2020; Valinsky 2020). These recent measures reveal Big Porn's refusal to invest in better content moderation and further exacerbate the already precarious position of the porn performer, especially the amateur one. I speculate that porn in this moment will continue to shift away from the gift economy and return to a model of payment, just as one would have encountered at the video store before the internet, and the porn theatre before video, and the traveling blue movie before the porn theater. As a consequence, the sociality of pornographic spectatorship may also find renewal in the livestream comments that often accompany cam shows, which are a form of theater, first and foremost.

Pornography in the face of Covid-19 makes the labour of sexual performance central, whereas tube sites have largely elided this labour, if not outright stolen it.<sup>28</sup> As the adult film industry reopens cautiously, how various performers exhibit care and for whom will be important to track. Mutual aid and charity are two different approaches to the same problem—that is, inequality: or, the structural failure of the state and the constitutive violence of capitalism—and some efforts ultimately may prove to be more altruistic than others. Regardless of how cynically we may view these efforts, the need for care is palpable in the age of coronavirus, and pornography will only continue to thrive if its performers and viewers live to see another day.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

1. Friedrich Engels comes the closest to giving sexuality its due within early Marxist thought. See Engels 2010.
2. A special issue of *Porn Studies*, edited by Brandon Arroyo, is forthcoming on the very topic of pornography and Marxism and will further nuance this often-overlooked confluence.
3. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon are the standard bearers of this line of reasoning. Their joint efforts centered on the “media effects” of pornography, which they alleged directly produced misogyny and violence in the men who consumed it. Their efforts culminated in the mid 1980s with the adoption of antipornography ordinances in various cities across the United States—most prominently in Indianapolis. They became figureheads of Women Against Pornography (WAP), colluders with the conservative Moral Majority movement, and feminist dissidents in the notorious “Sex Wars.” See Duggan 2006.

4. The strongest advocate of the “public health crisis” argument is sociologist Gail Dines. Her website <https://www.culturereframed.org/the-porn-crisis/> gives an overview of this framework.
5. Berkowitz and Callen examine, among other things, the risks associated with sucking, getting sucked, fucking, getting fucked, no risk sex, kissing, rimming, water sports, dildoes, sadism & masochism, fist fucking, washing up, backrooms, bookstores, balconies, meatracks & tearooms, the baths, closed circles of fuck buddies, jerk off clubs, poppers, buying sex, selling sex, and personals.
6. One of the first assertions in Berkowitz and Callen’s pamphlet is that a couple could merely get tested for CMV (the initial nomenclature before HIV) and pursue a monogamous relationship, and therefore ignore the remainder of their pamphlet’s advice (1983, 13). Douglas Crimp (1987) challenges the latent sex-negativity of Berkowitz and Callen, arguing that promiscuity had all along helped gay men to imagine and enact new modes of sexual expression and sociality that ultimately helped to keep them safe during the AIDS epidemic.
7. Cindy Patton (1991) writes about filmmaker Al Parker, who was an early adopter of safe sex on his porn sets. Parker offered an expansive vision for safe sex that included, in addition to condom usage, surgical gloves for finger fucking and plastic wrap for anilingus. Additionally, Patton notes that jerking off, licking, tit play, and verbal play were a part of the growing repertoire of acts that helped shift perceptions on what might constitute “sex” to begin with.
8. Laura Kipnis (1999) writes: “A Culture’s pornography becomes, in effect, a very precise map of that culture’s borders,” including “its anxieties, investments, contradictions.”
9. I want to note that the bulk of this essay was written in the spring of 2020, with revisions taking place in late fall of 2020. Wherever possible, I have revised pertinent information as need be, but I must acknowledge upfront the difficulty in keeping up-to-date with the many developments in the Covid-19 pandemic and the porn industry.
10. João Florêncio (2020) has written about how Covid-19 differs from the AIDS epidemic in constitutive ways. At the same time, it is important to note that Black and LatinX communities have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 in the United States. It could ultimately be the case that Covid-19 will foster stigma alongside minoritarian populations.
11. See Lynn Comella’s compelling editorial: Lynn Comella, “The Adult Industry Can Survive without Government Help. Here’s Why,” *The Washington Post* (12 March 2020): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/05/12/adult-industry-can-survive-without-government-help-heres-why/>
12. The Free Speech Coalition imposed a voluntary production hold on March 15, 2020, which it then lifted on June 12, 2020, to curb the spread of Covid-19 in mainstream porn scenes. Upon lifting the hold, the FSC offered new Safety Guidelines, including revisions to the PASS system. No doubt, in the interim, some rogue pornographers and amateurs continued to film pornography, but on the whole, the output from mainstream outlets dropped precipitously and relied on a backlog of unreleased content.

13. A prime example of this can be found in transgender sex workers Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson founding Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which opened a shelter for LGBT youth with rent paid by their sex work. See <https://www.nswp.org/timeline/event/street-transvestite-action-revolutionaries-found-star-house>
14. The full Covid-19 Guidelines from the Free Speech Coalition can be found here: <https://www.freespeechcoalition.com/blog/2020/06/12/announcing-the-covid-19-guidelines/>.
15. Contrary to this speculation, Tim Dean (2009) argues for the radical ethics of bareback sex, a concept that seems difficult to imagine transposed to the current pandemic.
16. *The Evergreen Review* has launched a coronavirus-themed porn series called “COVID-69: Personal Protective Erotica,” which they refer to as a “heroic effort to alleviate your boredom.” The first two stories can be found here: Alexis N. Wright, “Behind the Bars, No World,” *The Evergreen Review*: <https://www.evergreenreview.com/read/behind-the-bars-no-world/>; Camille Claudel, “Aries,” *Evergreen Review*: <https://www.evergreenreview.com/read/camille-claudel-aries/>
17. A prime example of the never-ending crusade against porn can be found in Nicholas Kristof’s op-ed, “The Children of Pornhub” (Kristof 2020).
18. This concept was first examined at length in 1988 by David Cheal (2015), who notes the striking manner in which this practice, coded largely as a private activity performed by women, came to draw mainstream appeal and practice.
19. See Episode 3: “We Know What You Did,” *Reply All* (3 December 2014): <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/awhmex>
20. An interesting, albeit incomplete, take on the effects of Pornhub’s free content can be found in Jon Ronson’s podcast *The Butterfly Effect: Who Really Pays the Price For Free Porn?*, July 27, 2017. <http://www.jonronson.com/butterfly.html>.
21. For an early example of this, see Hillyer 2004.
22. In the case of OnlyFans, 20% goes to the website.
23. Berlant defines “slow death” as “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence.” See Berlant 2007, 754.
24. As of December, 2020, the World Health Organization tracked 1,700,000 deaths worldwide and nearly 77,000,000 cases globally. See the WHO Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Dashboard, <https://covid19.who.int/>.
25. Between writing and revising this article for publication, this contention has been challenged by journalist Jeffrey Toobin, who was fired for exposing himself on a zoom call, which he claims to have been unaware he was still on. While this example is intriguing in its ineptitude, my contention remains that the average viewer will find that working from home largely facilitates rather than limits pornographic viewership. For more on the Toobin debacle, see Katherine Rosman and Jacob Bernstein, “The Undoing of Jeffrey Toobin,” *The New York Times* (15 December 2020): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/style/jeffrey-toobin-zoom.html>

26. While I am being a bit flippant here, it is important to note that this is a serious question to ask, and one worthy of pursuing. Philosopher Alan Soble (1986) approaches the question in a slightly different vein, devoting three chapters to the speculation on pornography's place in a post-capitalist society, if any.
27. Angela Jones has written the first comprehensive book on the topic of online camming. For more, see Jones 2020.
28. Some pornography makes the act of remuneration central to its logic, even if it, too, is exploitative. One example is gay-for-pay pornography, which I have written about elsewhere. For more, see Stadler 2013.

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