

Going Public with Pornography Studies

Lessons from Creating the *Porno Cultures Podcast*

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Both being in academia and consuming pornography can be very lonely experiences. To complete either a master's degree or a PhD thesis, you must spend endless hours in a stand-off with a blank Word document struggling to conjure up just one more sentence before you can justify taking yet another writing break. And oftentimes, that writing break consists of merely moving your Word document out of the way so you can have an unobstructed view of that new pornographic video you have been saving as a "reward" for finally hitting your writing goal for the day. Though, honestly, it is sometimes hard to tell which came first, the earned break or the desire to watch pornography? Either way, both activities are decidedly solo affairs. So, what happens when these two lonely activities become the centerpiece of one's professional public persona?

Well, this is a dynamic that all media scholars face once they explain to their advisor that they want to dedicate their academic career to studying adult media and finally get their work published. There is a lot of trepidation about this type of academic *coming out* to your professors, parents, and friends that is repeated over-and-over again whenever someone asks you: "what are you writing about"? This apprehension is warranted, because while you have done all the hard work of reading the academic texts and analyzing the aesthetics, you are constantly confronted by non-academics who have *very strong* opinions about pornography, and they are not about to let you sway them from their reactionary thoughts about the genre. Because of this, there is no doubt that going public with your pornographic scholarly work is fraught with peril! This essay is an attempt to articulate my personal journey with *coming out* as a pornographic scholar in an even more public way than most. In addition to writing the traditional academic journal articles, books, and teaching classes about adult media, I have put myself in the unique position of creating and hosting a show titled the *Porno Cultures Podcast*, which attempts to make pornography studies accessible to the widest possible listening audience. And while associating myself with what many consider to be a "problematic" media genre might have its downsides, this podcast experience has taught me that there are a lot of fellow pornography studies academics who are excited about the opportunity to go *public* with their work within a culture that belittles the value of pornography.

A professor once explained to me that I should think of my dissertation in relation to my bookshelf. She said that I should look at my bookshelf and think about what book is missing from the self that would make your collection more

complete. And that I should think about my dissertation as that missing book that will complement every other book that I own. As practical advice, this helped me figure out what type of podcast I wanted to create. After decades of being interested in radio (I was listening to the *Howard Stern Show* in the 6th grade!), and listening to podcasts for a few years, I realized that while there were many entertaining podcasts about sex and pornography, and even a few that did invite academics on to chat, I started to look at my bookshelf and realize that a lot of the authors I was citing in my dissertation weren't among the guests being interviewed on these podcasts. The gold standard of pornographic podcasts is *The Rialto Report*. I'm not sure how the host Ashley West unearths the long-lost stories that he features on the show or how he finds these performers from the genre's golden age who haven't been heard from in decades, but the oral histories composing these audio documentaries constitute a detailed history of pornography from the 1970s and 1980s that is unmatched by any academic. Appreciating the reach and success of this podcast, I knew that whatever I did would need to maintain a safe distance from the historical approach of *The Rialto Report*.

And when evaluating your potential skills as a podcaster, you also need to know what you're good at and what you're not good at. And when listening to podcasts like *The Peepshow Podcast* hosted by Jessie Sage and P.J. Sage or *Sex Out Loud* with Tristan Taormino, I admittedly get intimidated by what seems to me as their ease in speaking in such a casual manner with minimal reliance on a script. These hosts sound as natural in front of a microphone as they would in a casual conversation. I'm in awe of them! And I'm aware that I don't have their capabilities as a host. So I knew that my show needed to be far more scripted, because once I have that script in front of me, it gives me the confidence to jump off script at times and that helps to give me the confidence to sound more natural throughout the podcast. Essentially, by figuring out what those podcasts do well, I was able to figure out what I wasn't so good at and work to ameliorate my own shortcomings. And since the *Rialto Report* perfected the pornographic history angle, and the other podcast are great listens for the general masses, I figured that I could offer a more niche option for listeners looking for more insight in terms of pornographic theory and applying an academic perspective to the public pornographic discourse. Ultimately, most people don't know what "pornography studies" is, so by inviting pornography scholars on to talk about their books, the *Porno Cultures Podcast* is offering listeners the opportunity to learn about the academic study of pornography in an accessible and (hopefully) fun way. So in the spring of 2017, I decided to take the plunge and start a podcast of my own.

Thankfully, because of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and the Adult Film History special interest group, having access to most pornography studies academics has never been easier. By going to this yearly conference, I've been able to meet the authors of the most exciting books about pornography being produced today. So far, my strategy for choosing guest has been as simple as reading the newest books and then inviting the author on for an interview. In the future, I'd like to invite authors whose books could be considered "classics" in the discipline. However, I also think it's important to invite anyone on the show

who's helping people think about pornography in new and interesting ways. This is why I've also interviewed Alan Bounville to talk about his immersive play *Adonis Memories*, which has a script composed of various stories from men who frequented the gay pornography theater named The Adonis in Hell's Kitchen, which operated in that capacity from 1975 to 1989. The play was not only sexual, but also touching when listening to these real-life stories of people who genuinely had life-changing experiences making friends and discovering new aspects of their sexuality within a pornographic theater. I've also had the pleasure of interviewing an actual pornographic performer on the show who wrote his own one-man show about his experiences growing-up gay in North Dakota and becoming a burlesque and porn actor after moving to New York City. Chris Harder couldn't have been more kind, and I'll admit, it was quite thrilling conducting the interview in his bedroom!

Embarking on an academic journey to study pornography on a deeper level is not a decision that is taken lightly by any scholar. Therefore, I had a suspicion that the professors I would be interviewing for the podcast would have interesting personal anecdotes that would help explain the origins of their pornographic obsessions. This is why I tap into my inner Bernard Pivot and begin every interview with the same question—"describe your first experience with pornography." It has been funny to see the look on interviewee's faces when I ask them this question. I think there is an unspoken understanding between us just how formative this experience is in most people's lives, and crucial to the ways in which each scholar understands the role pornography plays in their work. Peter Alilunas and Whitney Stub recounted stories from their childhoods about their efforts to watch pornography within a highly religious family environment. For these two men, pornographic censorship was a foundational aspect of their family dynamic. It's no wonder that their respective books *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (2016) and *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (2010) focus primarily on corporate and religious efforts to censor pornography. Laura Helen Marks admitted that she grew-up being vehemently anti-pornography. And it wasn't until she watched pornography for the first time with a boyfriend as an older teenager that she realized that there wasn't anything for her to be afraid of. I suppose it is not surprising that her first book, *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic* (2018), centres on the tension between sexually repressive Victorian aesthetics and pornographic expression. On the other hand, Amy Werbel very casually described seeing her first pornography by looking through her brother's stash, and even had a babysitter bring her and a friend to a pornographic theater! For someone growing-up in early 1980s New York City, sexuality was not taboo, but just another piece of the fabric of the city. Considering her experiences, it's no surprise that her book, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (2018), does such an amazing job of historically recapturing just what a pathetic and mocked character Comstock was. Comstock was the first United States Postal inspector and secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Werbel argues that Comstock was anachronistic even

for his own era where brothels accommodating both gay and straight customers were a normalized part of urban life. The book illustrates that throughout New York City's history, public displays of sexual art and information was never as big a scandal for the masses as it was for a small cabal of moralistic prudes with far too much political and religious money empowering them. Of course, I am no psychologist, so it would be inappropriate for me to draw too many conclusions about how youthful experiences centered around pornography dramatically influence the trajectory of someone's entire academic career. However, these stories told on the podcast are not included in these author's books. So, being able to hear these stories firsthand from the authors themselves adds an important layer of relatability for readers who might feel intimidated delving into high theory or detailed history as it relates to pornography. Personally, perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of the podcast for me is being able to help humanize some of the figures populating the Ivory Tower. Doing so helps to make both academia and pornography studies more relatable. This is what makes podcasting an ideal platform for pornography studies. Perhaps by hearing the voice of a welcoming academic talk about their work without all of the typical jargon required when writing, the platform helps to strip away the mysteries of pornography studies for those who aren't acquainted with it, and helps listeners realize that pornography studies is just an extension of the best of what cultural studies has to offer.

It is easy to say that pornography studies—as well as pornography itself—is at a crossroads. It is easy to say that because the more you learn about the history of pornography, the more you realize that pornography continually finds itself at a crossroads. From the decades it was an illegal object that was covertly circulating amongst various public/private spheres, through the 1980s where the gay community embraced pornography as a rejection of the death rhetoric around AIDS, to the work of anti-porn feminists weaponizing pornography as the cause of capitalist and misogynist denigration and discrimination, to our contemporary moment when many are struggling to figure out the parameters sexual enjoyment in light of the #MeToo movement, sex and pornography are always in crisis mode! The podcast was unable to avoid the most contemporary sexual crisis. A large swath of the podcast was recorded while the #MeToo movement was at its peak. And I was interested to take the pulse of pornography scholars to get their thoughts on the intersection of pornography studies and popular sexual assault narratives. Of course, within the mainstream media, these two discourses are constantly intertwined with each other. However, within that context it is done to *prove* a false, yet convenient, causality to explain away sexual assault as merely the result of men consuming “perverted” pornography. Believe it or not, my guests had far more nuanced opinions about the matter.

In the “Grad Student Roundtable” episode of the podcast, German scholar Madita Oeming worried about the #MeToo movement becoming too centered on men and whether or not their attempts at flirting and sexual initiation would be perceived as “politically correct” in the future. She explained how the mainstream #MeToo rhetoric was less focused on how to solve the problem of sexual abuse, and instead shifted the burden of blame to any type of male-initiated sexual

contact. Essentially, framing any type of male sexuality as *dangerous*—turning female trauma into male trauma. It takes someone who knows the history of pornography and sexuality in the West to be able to pick-up on the well-worn discourse of reframing all sex as threatening.

In my interview with the host of *The Rialto Report*, Ashley West, he recounted a party that he threw in Los Angeles for pornographic performers from the era’s “golden age” where the topic of #MeToo came up. He explained how the female performers who tried to crossover to mainstream work had “casting couch” experiences that they were not comfortable with, and that these experiences never happened on a pornographic set because the divisions between on-camera and off-camera sex are so definitive and well-respected within the industry. The performers at the party did not have any sexual harassment stories to tell related to their pornographic experience. And since pornographic performers’ voices are totally absent from mainstream conversations about sexual assault, I was honored to provide even a small platform where their experiences could be validated.

Ultimately, I think my favorite moments of the podcast are when I get to explore the cracks and crevasses of a guest’s biography or academic approaches that do not fit comfortably into a think piece, journal article, or book. For me, it is the relatability and the humanity of the scholar that helps to make pornography studies worthwhile. And these are the areas where I believe we need to be exploring deeper when looking towards the new frontiers of pornography studies. The work of pornography studies does not lie in digging deeper into the archives or formulating more abstract theory, but in building on what has been done, and taking it to the masses with personable scholars speaking compassionately, empathetically, and quite frankly, erotically! We are socialized in North America to spurn voices that speak in nuanced terms about pornography. Popular discourse wants us to believe (just like with our political parties) that there are only two legitimate opinions to have about pornography—it’s either the worst thing that has ever been inflicted upon humanity or it’s the greatest thing since sliced bread. The media cannot think beyond binaries. Thankfully, there has never been a more robust time for alternative media outlets and a group of professors eager to have their work reach as many people as possible. The pornography studies community is both close nit and generous with their work because we know that we must rely on each other if we are to successfully fight off critics who question the legitimacy of pornography studies. Perhaps all of this sounds too much like a neoliberal marketing scheme. Fair enough! But it’s important to remember that for a lot of people, pornography is a very personal, idiosyncratic, and an essential part of their sexual health and enjoyment. Hence, why should anyone seek to expand their knowledge of the genre from an impersonal scholar? In “the personal is political” equation, academics have done a good job of expanding their mindset as it relates to the “political,” but we are still woefully behind when it comes to accentuating the “personal.” Therefore, the next generation of pornography scholars must strive to make their work public and personal. Without that, we sacrifice the discourse to the loudest reactionary voices.