"If *I Was Moved...*": Doing Digital Ethnography in the Fields of Pornhub

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I am often put in awkward situations where I am asked by other graduate students and academics to explain my dissertation. When I respond that I research online pornography they typically have one of three responses: (a) they light up over the possibility to talk about a taboo subject; (b) they make the well-trod joke of responding, "I know an expert" and then point at themselves; (c) they look at me slightly disapprovingly and begin to stare at an imaginary point just past my head. If I do make it past the point of saying "pornography" to people, they are often curious as to *how* one studies porn. Most assume my work is sociological in nature—that I must be conducting large scale interviews with the naughty individuals who watch adult content, travelling to observe shoots and gain the trust of performers, and/or accumulating large-scale data sets. I invariably let them down when I reveal much of my research involves digital ethnography—the practice of using the Internet as a research tool to analyze the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the web.

You can frequently find me alone (in sweatpants), talking to myself, and crawling through the web to track and utilize hashtags, search engines, hyperlinks and website archives. It is not strange for a graduate student to be isolated and in front of a computer, but the addition of pornography complicates the scenario. For the remainder of this meditation, I reflect on the practice of doing virtual field work in the context of online pornography. Namely, I want to focus on questions of how my own body is implicated in the process of studying online porn and what it means for my research outcomes. Just as it is the case with all other media, adult websites are designed to elicit emotional responses—ones that captures your attention and keeps you watching, searching and feeling. You might cringe, laugh, recoil in disgust, or, as it were, actually feel lustful. Even in the early days of graduate school, I always had a pressing, embarrassing—and I assumed naïve—recurring question: *does the body turn off when you begin your research? How do I stop myself from feeling? What does it mean to feel or have an embodied response in the context of research?*

I first began thinking about this question when I read the new preface in the 1999 reissue of Linda Williams' canonical porn studies book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* In this preface, penned ten years after the book was originally published in 1989, Williams takes up the topic of researcher objectivity in relationship to porn and reflects on her own process. She explains,

while it was not her position when she published *Hard Core*, she later came to believe the topic of pornography uniquely fractures the distance between researcher and object. Williams continues by suggesting a researcher's physical reaction is, in fact, "embedded" in whatever analysis is being performed. She writes, "this objective, distanced stance of the reasoned observer, neither partisan nor condemner, placed me in a position of indifference, as if above the genre. Was it right, or even useful to the analysis, to assume to be indifferent to, or unmoved by, these texts? Or, if I was moved, as I was sometimes to either arousal or offence, what was the proper place of this reaction in criticism?" (Williams 1999, x-xi). At the time of writing the book, Williams' used her objectivity as an instrument for re-contextualizing pornography as a form of media, as a genre necessitating a complex and careful treatment. The field of pornography studies was born of this novel approach. *Hard Core* did so much incredible work*,* and yet, I find myself often returning to the moment when Williams reexamined her work ten years later, pausing to consider whether or not her distanced stance was truthful to the experience of researching pornography (Williams 1999, x-xi).

Since the publication of *Hard Core*, it has become less common for pornography scholars to conduct their analysis in front of the screen and more common for them to use fieldwork to deepen their understanding of the pornography industry. In the article, "Studying Porn Cultures" Lynn Comella relays her experience of attending the Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas, writing, "One way to 'get at' the cultural dimensions of pornography is to ethnographically go inside and behind the scenes of the porn industry to better understand its many moving parts." She goes on to say, "Porn studies-in-action requires that we leave the confines of our offices, and spend time in the places where pornography is made, distributed and consumed, discussed and debated, taught and adjudicated" (Comella 2014, 68-69). Hence, if we want draw attention to the fact that pornography is, in fact a complex industry, it is imperative we leave the university and spend time understanding that complexity for ourselves. "Porn Studies-in-action" does not only entail producing novel insights about the industry, it is a method researchers should use to engage self-reflexively on what it means to study something like pornography from within the academy.

Pornography studies is marked by a perennially marginal status, despite the consistent and rigorous output of scholars in the field. It can be difficult to convince anyone, let alone funding bodies that studying pornography is a legitimate, necessary, and indeed urgent endeavor. I have heard bleak stories from numerous students and academics who reported being openly discouraged from pursuing the topic, denied funding at various stages of their careers, or marginalized in their respective institutions. I have been advised multiple times to abstain from using the word "pornography" in my writing and exchange it for "adult content" to lend propriety and credibility to my work.[1] On numerous occasions, colleagues have taken it upon themselves to convey a singular hard truth: "you study pornography… don't expect to get money for that." Thus, the academy frequently discourages this type of research, which makes it all the more apparent why Lynn Comella pushes pornography scholars to get outside academic confines and seek more direct knowledge of the intricacies of the industry.

I am not an established scholar. I have yet to receive the type of funding to support the type of field work that would grant access to particular people and places. I cannot travel to spaces where the industry is revealed to me. For now, I travel only through online spaces. My field notes look like this:

> *I couldn't do any research at school again. I thought I had arrived at school early enough but that MA student from art history beat me to the reading room. I waved to my peers and headed home to crawl through the web for older versions of pornhub.com's homepage, particularly screenshots of 2012. As I sat in my kitchen, looking through Pornhub, I started to think about the knife's edge separating what I was doing at that moment from a user who went home early to watch porn for fun. Our bodies were potentially in the same position: eyes darting over our shoulders only to feel relief at finally being alone, browsing through the web trying to find the exact right thing, getting distracted by an advertisement, finding something interesting.*

Technically, my scraping of the web for pornography content is consistent with digital ethnography. But it is also the exact type of behavior that qualifies my research as unworthy of funding for many institutions. To return to the words of Linda Williams, "if I was moved, as I was sometimes to either arousal or offence, what was the proper place of this reaction in criticism?" (Williams 1999, x-xi). The humanities do not reject emotional affect—in fact, theories of emotion have gained new popularity in the last decade. But does being turned on count? This is a feeling inappropriate for the academy, I have come to recognize. Yet, if I consider online pornography to be an urgent research topic, I must—out of scholarly necessity—find a way to channel my emotions into theoretical criticism. Perhaps, in this way, I can reflect on my position as a graduate student with proper perspective. I, like millions of the very people I study, steal away to secretly open Pornhub on my phone. While I may be doing it to trigger pop-up adds and take screenshots, I believe the laughter, discomfort, and even physical desire I sometimes experience bring me closer to achieving scholarly insight. This is the type of experiential information I might not have access to, were I in a less precarious academic position. Porn is my object of research. It is an object that creates desire through technology. This is the structuring principle of my approach. I am concerned with how Pornhub uses big data to create desire from desire. Thus, it is utterly counterproductive to try and isolate my own feelings from my research object. Doing so would undermine the very argument I am forwarding. So, as a researcher, I am in meaningful ways indissociable from millions of other Pornhub users, with our multitudinously streamlined personal routines: we all open the homepage of Pornhub and browse in hope of find something that moves us.

Notes
1. For more thoughts on this topic see Linda Williams (2014).
2. I want to clarify: the difficulties I experience as a researcher are clearly incommensurate with the marginalization and ostracism performers and sex workers experience daily. For more details on the stresses of sex work I recommend the zine, "A Brief Introduction to FOSTA-SESTA" (Shamas 2018).

References
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