

Scissoring and Other Lies: The Importance of the Creator
and the Audience in Queer Porn

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ENG 267: Changing Genres of Erotica

Coming out as a woman who likes having sex with other women left a lot of people in my life with questions for me, some of which I could answer, some of which I could not. One common question I never felt I could respond to was: “so just how do you guys do it?” I was uncomfortable with this question not because I felt embarrassed by my sexuality or my sex life, nor because I thought everything I did in the bedroom should stay a secret from my friends and acquaintances: I am a fairly open person in regards to sex. I simply felt, and still feel, that my answer would be inadequate for what the questioner wanted: I could not possibly encapsulate the vast world of lesbian sex with my personal experience. The fact of the matter is, there is no right way to have lesbian sex. There is not even an agreed upon act that necessarily constitutes “sex,” as there is in heterosexual sex. Many women define cunnilingus as sex, but in my opinion, this is not a sufficient defining feature, as this same act with a man would not be thought of with the same weight. Strap-on sex is something that not all women do, and is problematic as a crucial factor because it adheres too closely to the heteronormative notion that penis-shaped penetration is a necessary part of sex. In my experience, my partner and I have intuitively known when we have had sex, regardless of the physical acts performed and what “lines” they crossed or did not cross. The “definition” was ever changing, and women I have spoken to about this idea have expressed similar thoughts on the nature of lesbian sex.

Thus, even within the lesbian community, “what we do” is a varied, complicated idea. We cannot even agree upon what consistently constitutes sex— how could we possibly expect people who are not lesbians to understand it? Lesbian sex remains a mystery to so many people to a degree that gay male sex and heterosexual sex do not. It is possible that the absence of a penis, and thus a definite form of penetration, leaves people confused as to how sex might work. This androcentric view of sex is just one product of living in a patriarchal society. However, the

confusion is perpetuated by a few factors that are more easily dealt with and discussed than the patriarchy: the lack of sex education for young adults, and with this, the sheer absence of queer sex education, and the fact that the majority of lesbian porn is fake. When I first had sex with a woman, I immediately realized that the representations of lesbian sex I had seen in mainstream pornography had gotten a lot wrong. Considering this, the questions I had been asked now made more sense, for there was far less information out there for lesbians on how to have sex, and the self-education that did exist in the form of mainstream porn was simply wrong. It took a few years and many awful pornos for me to find any other sort of depictions of lesbian sex than this bad pornography, so, for awhile, the closest I got to seeing a truthful on-screen lesbian scene was YouTube clips of TV show girls making out, and the fairly censored, soft-core sex scenes in “The L Word.” Only very recently did I stumble upon queer pornography, as it is a more underground world of porn that is usually found by word-of-mouth recommendation.

The world of queer pornography looks very different from the mainstream porn universe, in which male pleasure is explored from every angle imaginable. While the categories exist in the conventional pornographic world for queer pleasure, with nearly every major porn collection site sporting gay and lesbian collections, as is true of heterosexual porn, nearly everything is made by men and for men. It is for this reason that, while male gay porn is at least a reasonably reliable representation of how gay sex can work (as it is made by gay men), lesbian porn is riddled with inaccuracies (as it is made by straight men). In contrast, real lesbian porn, more often made by women who have actually engaged in lesbian sex, features real lesbians, real orgasms, and real sex acts. So, while *some* lesbians do “scissor,” sorry, men: it is not “the way we do it.”

The fact that pornography is a male dominated industry is not news— it is clear that men’s pleasure is the goal from the way most heterosexual porn plays out. Feminist porn developed as a

subset of the industry for this very reason: to provide women with an alternative to cum-on-the-face, run-of-the-mill porn. While this is a testament to the way men dominate nearly every societal sphere, it is not an unwarranted one: “about 83% of pornography addicts are men and 17% are women,” and while “87% of college males” admit to viewing pornography, only “31% of females” do (“Staggering Statistics”). Thus when it comes to making lesbian porn (or most porn, for that matter), producers are not gearing the market towards women, and are therefore more concerned with depicting what men want. And what many men want is some sort of girl-on-girl action. This fact is made clear in works like *Rent Girl*, in which Michelle Tea and her girlfriend Eleanor start a type of prostituting where they have sex and allow a man to watch for pay. The popular comedy company *College Humor* shows a similar phenomena in a video called “Lesbian Mountain,” in which two women are shown in a parallel world to the men in *Brokeback Mountain*, but where the community surrounding the women express fascination with and support for their relationship, as opposed to resentment and hatred of it. The park ranger in this video watches them have sex in their tent through binoculars, a scene in contrast with the one from *Brokeback Mountain*, where the men are fired for sexual activity in the ranger’s disgust. Straight male fascination with lesbian sex is common knowledge, and the evidence supporting this idea is overwhelming in pop culture. But why?

The only true way to know why men are so excited by lesbian sex is to ask them. According to sex/love blogger Gayatri Parmeswaran, the men she has asked about this tell her that they look at two women in bed together as “a performance” and an “an invitation for [them] to join” (Parmeswaran). Some men do not even see them as lesbians, they see them as two women waiting for a man to please them, where putting on a show on his behalf is part of the foreplay. Another penis in the mix feels more like competition, and being turned on by it borders on the homoerotic (which is very dangerous territory for straight men). Thus the overwhelming

majority of lesbian porn is not even made with the actresses *trying* to portray true lesbian characters, they are simply two women putting on a show for a man while he imagines himself sandwiched between them. Not only are the directors male, the actresses in lesbian porn are generally straight women who have little to no experience with real lesbian sex, as women get paid an average of “three times” the amount they would for straight porn, and many porn stars will do this “gay for pay” type filming (Hodin). The lack of lesbians in lesbian porn is incredibly obvious—nearly all of the actresses are incredibly feminine, for male pleasure, discounting the large number of butch lesbians, and have long fingernails, a give-away of a straight actress. Lesbians know to trim their nails before getting into bed with a woman, to avoid giving her partner scratches or cuts when fingering. Hardly ever are any lesbians involved in any part of the production of this so-called “lesbian porn.”

There is some variance in the way mainstream lesbian porn is portrayed. One common type is depicted with a “dominant” and “submissive” structure, so there is a “man” and a “woman” and the traditional male/female power trip is still present, though both women are still very petite and feminine in physical appearance (long hair, large breasts, makeup, slender). In this sort of porn, much of the heterosexual dominance prevails, where the dominant terrifies and humiliates the submissive. Thus men can see themselves as “the savior” who “rescue[s] women from a pitiful fate of sleeping with women” (Zawinski 1). Moreover, male audience members still see a woman dominated sexually, but there are two pairs of breasts present and no other men to distract from the performance. In this porn, women are fucked brutally as in much straight porn, the feminine domination generally involving a strap on, fisting, rough fingering, or other penetration, a stand-in for a “real” man to supply pleasure. Oftentimes girls are tied up and “vibed,” where a vibrator is held on them until they are convulsing. These videos involve a great deal of screaming and pain, and tend to fall in line with the classic dominant/submissive power

trip of heterosexual videos. While there may be real orgasms in these videos, the climax appears to be dragged out of women, and the acts performed fail to show how lesbians can possibly have sex without the use of elaborate set ups and a great deal of toys, or without adhering to the heteronormative “penetrative sex” standard.

Another sub-category of mainstream lesbian porn is a more tender, romantic view of lesbian love. This tends to include that which falls into the more “female friendly” category, like videos by X-Art and Lesbea. Lesbea, for example, advertises their pornography as transcending the usual trends of lesbian porn by showing “minimal toy use, real orgasms, [and] deep kissing” (Lesbea Home Page). However, the “sex” in these videos suffers from the opposite problem that the rougher videos do. In these videos, the women touch each other’s hair a lot, compliment one another, kiss, carefully stroke each other with maybe one finger, and sometimes will perform what can only be described as underwhelming cunnilingus, where it seems the girls are afraid to do more than kiss each other’s inner thighs. Oftentimes the women will “scissor,” where they rub their genitals together in a very awkward, frantic fashion. There are no real orgasms in these videos, because there is hardly any stimulating contact. These videos attempt to capture the more passionate, tender side of feminine love, but fail to provide any picture of sex beyond slow, drawn out, clearly staged foreplay with exaggerated, fake moaning. Both categories generally feature very femme, straight actresses, rarely accounting for butch lesbians, and neither is geared towards women– or, women are a clear afterthought.

Any lesbian who has seen lesbian porn knows that these “popular renditions of lesbianism rarely capture the experience of the majority of women who love or have sex with other women” (Hollibaugh 451). While these men in charge of porn are sexually fascinated with lesbians, they are also ignorant to their actual practices: this “blind heterosexism” creating “an inability to imagine ‘what [lesbians] actually do in bed’” (455). Because of the dominating male

influence in porn, “pornography mirrors myths about women” in this way (Zawinski 1). The absence of a penis is very obvious, thus toys like dildos and strap-ons are a popular feature in lesbian porn, the obsession with penetration a clear male notion of the sexual experience. In these videos, orgasms are forced out of the submissive; she is often face-straddled by the dominant woman in a way familiar to heterosexual face-fucking, and the fact that the sex is between two women is lost in the power structure and only clear in their physical bodies. The idea here is that without a man, something is missing, and must be replicated. When there are no toys involved and the romantic angle is the goal, like in Lesbea porn, the sex does look and sound incomplete, almost as if a precursor to real sex, or an invitation for men like those Parmeswaran mentions in her blog. These women coo and moan and caress each other everywhere, but never experience a real climax, their bodies moving incredibly fluidly in a way unnatural to a real orgasm, which involves more obvious shaking, verbal cues, and sometimes ejaculate. When mainstream porn does occasionally feature female ejaculation, it fetishizes it, makes it the centerpiece of the video, and appears unnatural. The sex here is quick, forceful, has a clear “goal” in mind (the notion of simply enjoying a partner’s body is totally lost in mainstream pornography), and is often very formal and clinical, in a how-to-make-her-squirt way. However, only in these “squirting” videos is there clearly a real orgasm— though it generally looks like a very bad one, forced out for show.

The underlying problem with all of this lesbian porn is that it is not lesbian porn; it is male porn featuring two women. Made by men, starring straight women, geared towards a male audience, these videos lack a clear lesbian influence. They fetishize lesbianism for male pleasure by tapping into the aspects of pornography most appealing to men in straight porn and applying them to two sets of breasts and two vaginas, or by attempting to highlight femininity with two women exploring each other’s bodies in a performance-like act inviting men to bring their

penises into the picture and begin the “real” sex.

This understanding of lesbian porn as a lie is a widespread, well-known view in the LGBTQA community. When “reaction videos” became popular on YouTube, people of all sexualities took to making videos of men and women watching and reacting to various kinds of pornography, usually for humorous purposes. One such video, made by YouTube personality “Davey Wavey,” shows lesbians making comments in reaction to watching a mainstream lesbian pornographic video. In “Real Lesbians React to Lesbian Porn,” Davey Wavey’s gay friends Steph, Bria, Chrissy, Arielle, and Stevie make comments such as, “I’m not familiar with the practice of the spitting on the tits,” “it’s too many fingers [in the vagina], these are all straight girls who can take a lot of shit in their vagina,” “calling her a bitch, that’s not sexy at all,” “they’re putting a stiletto heel inside of her body,” and, “if you are moaning when nothing is happening to you, you are faking an orgasm” (*Real Lesbians React*). Additionally, the girls comment on the fact that the video is clearly marketed towards men, saying: “she’s deep throating the heel, that’s how you know it’s for men”; “the ads are clearly targeted towards men, there’s lots of dicks”; “I have yet to see a porno that is made for lesbians”; “lesbian porn isn’t made for lesbians obviously”; and, “it’s gross, and it’s not sexy, and it’s not true” (*Real Lesbians React*). Another YouTube video, made by lesbian blogger Arielle Scarcella, shows lesbians talking about the myth of scissoring, saying, “I think it’s a porn thing,” “I don’t get the point of it, really,” “it just seems very fake,” and asking of men, “is that what they think, that it’s possible to get one clit against another clit?” (*Lesbians Explain*). While some lesbians to claim to enjoy “scissoring,” most admit that it is not quite as “theatrical” as mainstream porn depicts: a less commonly understood term, with a more specific definition of “real scissoring” is “tribbing” or “tribadism,” in which one woman lies with her legs spread and the other lays between her legs and grinds her pelvis into her partner in a humping motion, often using her hip or leg to create

friction, as a form of foreplay, or even a way to initiate orgasm. Oftentimes the girl on top will straddle one of her partner's legs to create a similar experience. Such an act is often referred to as scissoring, but it does not closely resemble the more popular form of scissoring in lesbian porn, in which women spread their legs in an acrobatic fashion and attempt to press their genitals together in the way two pairs of scissors might fit together if turned perpendicular to one another. This scissoring is generally very awkward, frantic, and the pleasure created from it in porn is clearly faked, like in nearly all staged lesbian porn. The point of it is to arouse men, most of whom have never seen two real lesbians have sex, and do not know the difference.

In the world of free porn, the only place to find genuine lesbian porn is by searching amateur categories for homemade videos made by lesbians. Though crude in filming quality and often difficult to see clearly, the sex is, at the very least, more real, as the girls involved are more often than not emotionally invested in one another's pleasure. Additionally, the women involved are the "directors" of the porn, unlike in most mainstream pornography.

Queer porn strays from the heteronormative, straight male, patriarchal porn I have been describing in many ways, the most obvious of which is by utilizing queer individuals. Sometimes this means casting lesbians, sometimes it means gay men, sometimes it means sexually fluid individuals, trans* individuals, gender-fluid, queer, or other non-binary identifying people. Mainstream pornography generally follows a very binary-driven gender spectrum, where women are feminine and men are masculine, and anyone who falls outside of the extremes of the binary is not included. In queer porn, peoples' bodies are enjoyed for what they are far more than they are in mainstream pornography, in which categories like "big ass" and "BBW" fetishize different aspects of physicality, dehumanizing the actors involved. While peoples' bodies are described, queer pornography does not categorize or fetishize bodies like mainstream pornography does, and it allows for the coexistence of these different features, pairing people such as two bigger

butch lesbians, or a muscular gay cisman and a heavier transman, or a thinner transman and a heavier femme girl together (but really, the possible combinations are as endless as they are in reality). Additionally, interracial scenes are not featured in an explicitly interracial category, in an attempt to normalize interracial sex against the mainstream fetishizing grain, where skin color is used as a sexual tool in pornography. These different combinations are not as highlighted as they are in mainstream porn, and instead mean to showcase the chemistry between the actors, rather than the distinctive, possibly categorical features of their bodies.

A relatively recent sub-category of pornography, queer pornography, operates as a more “underground” industry, generally thought of in line with feminist pornography. One of the most often talked-about sites in the queer community is the “Crash Pad Series,” a part of Pink and White Productions. This San Francisco based company’s focus is “female and queer sexuality” and, not surprisingly, most of their work is directed and produced by a woman, named Shine Louise Houston. Houston’s work has been featured in *Curve Magazine*, a best selling lesbian journal, and her films have won countless pornographic awards. In an interview with *Curve*, Houston says her goal is to “normalize...queer bodies,” that she “didn’t like what was going on in the porn industry in terms of representation of gay, lesbian, queer, and trans folks, so [she] made [her] own stuff” (Houston). A recent project of hers, called “Heavenly Spire,” features masculinity in a sexually inclusive way, with trans* and genderqueer individuals highlighted in the videos. Houston is not merely considered with the female experience— she focuses on the entire queer community in her vastly reaching work.

Houston’s “Crash Pad Series” encompasses a broader realm of sexuality than “Heavenly Spire,” blurring gender lines as well as exploring femininity and masculinity on their own. The videos are unique from one another beyond the many different types of bodies featured: some of the sex is rougher, and includes toys like strap-ons and vibrators, some has a clearly defined

“dominant” and “submissive,” some is more romantic and tender, some seems to defy the notion of “types of sex” altogether. In all of these videos, the orgasms are very clearly real, and the actors often have multiple in each video. The people are queer, and, while they are paid, they are at least more accustomed to and attracted to the other person they are sleeping with than the straight girls in mainstream lesbian porn are. For this reason in part, the actors seem very invested in one another’s pleasure, they are more familiar with each other’s bodies, they communicate, and they are respectful and kind in their sex acts. There is no exploitation or humiliation or exploration of intense pain, even though there is room for roughness and kink. The people in the videos are of all shapes, sizes, colors, and genders: heavier feminine girls, tattooed thin genderqueer people, edgy transmen, people of all races imaginable make appearances in the “Crash Pad Series.” These videos are a breath of fresh air.

One stand out video, titled “Jiz and Syd,” features two “dykes” or “bois,” masculine queers who won the 2006 “Feminist Porn Award” for the “Hottest Dyke Sex Scene.” Female bodied but muscled, with buzzed haircuts and tattoos, their bodies are unique to porn in that they bend the gender norms mainstream porn adheres so strongly to. These bois (a term used in the LGBTQA community for such masculine female queer people) interact beautifully, and much more realistically than most actors do in porn: they struggle with one another for dominance, they laugh when appropriate, they please each other simultaneously, they ask one another permission to move in certain directions. At one point, one of the bois ejaculates, or, “squirts,” and while this is shown on screen, it is not featured in the way that mainstream porn makes this a goal and a focal point of a video. We do not see an up-close shot of it– the camera does not change from the intimate but still full-bodied shot throughout the video. Afterwards, her partner comments, “you’re messy” teasingly, with the tender humor characteristic of real sex between real people who care for one another. Simultaneously, the sex has the frantic energy and passion

of what we might call “fucking;” they are trying to get each other off but are also still able to kiss deeply, hold one another, and communicate carefully during sex. This video, like many in the “Crash Pad Series,” is able to unite the rough and gentle so often split in the mainstream dichotomy of lesbian porn. These different kinds of sex, the variances between “rough” and “tender,” or “fucking” and “making love,” exist less as a dichotomy and more as a spectrum in queer porn, as in real life. In one night, a real couple may begin sex tenderly and build to a rougher “fucking,” then move between these extremes fluidly again. The categories in reality are not categories at all: it is difficult to define most sex acts as either rough or tender, and in mainstream porn, these are very often too easy to classify. The “Crash Pad Series,” and much other feminist porn, is more realistic in many ways, but this willingness to explore and move throughout the spectrum even over the course of minutes is a major one.

The “Crash Pad Series” does have videos that the straight men mainstream porn audience would most likely enjoy: one episode features “foxy femmes Skye and Stacey.” There are videos with threesomes, bondage, and other “mainstream” notions of male-oriented pornography as well. Although many of the videos do show bodies that do not fit into classic gender categories, there seems to be something for everyone at the “Crash Pad.” The most definite difference between this type of porn and mainstream lesbian porn is very obvious: that this porn is real sex on camera and lesbian porn is fake acting. The reasoning behind this difference is just as obvious, and I have already mentioned it: straight men and straight women make fake lesbian porn, queer people and real lesbians make real lesbian porn. However, to revisit the “invitation to join” argument, perhaps the genuine intimacy of these queer videos is not something straight men want to see on screen. With the way the women enjoy each other’s bodies in these videos, there is very little room to even imagine a man entering many of these scenes. They are shot in a very complete fashion, whether they are between two people or three, and by disregarding the

notion of a “performance,” actually end up making a better one. The actors seem more focused on each other’s pleasure than the pleasure of the audience. Perhaps, then, mainstream lesbian porn is intentionally fake: to make room for the imagination of the male viewer. If not, then it has a lot to learn from series like the “Crash Pad.”

There are other differences between these kinds of porn: “Crash Pad” features a more intimate filming style that focuses less on genitalia and more on the overall scene at hand, less on body parts and more on the people, or, the “whole picture.” The scenes are filmed in longer bits with more continuous shooting, and they are set in more realistic places for sex than much mainstream porn (in a bedroom vs. a concrete sex dungeon), the lighting is more natural and less fluorescent and harsh, and there is hardly any if any music: just very real, human sounds of two people having sex. The quality of porn does change when it is paid for, and some of the differences can be attributed to this disparity. However, much of the artistic choice stems from the same place that the genuine sex does: reality. Those in charge of filming, lighting, location scouting, and music in video collections like the “Crash Pad Series” are more familiar with queer sex and their queer audience than the heterosexual men at major pornographic companies are. They know their audience and they know their subject matter, and it shows.

“Crash Pad” is not the only genuine queer voyeur into porn out there. FTMFucker, Indie Porn Revolution, and QueerlySF all feature queer individuals and this alternative pornography style as well. There is good lesbian (or queer) porn out there; it is just not as easy to come by as the free, readily streaming mainstream lesbian videos that pop up on the first Google search. In *Best of Best of Women’s Erotica*, for example, the written lesbian porn (including “Riding the Rails” by Sacchi Green, “Infidelities” by G. L. Morrison, and “Kali” by Marianne Mohanraj), envisioned by women, have the features of “Crash Pad” porn that make it very realistic: care for one another between women, an understanding of the way women can have sex, and the

descriptions of how love between women feels. While written erotica differs from filmed in many ways, and does not allow for the physical features videos do (real lesbians as actors, intimate filmmaking, etc.) it does allow for a first-person account of the physical and emotional feelings sex with another woman creates, and the women in *Best of Best* capture this well. More importantly, even, the fundamental understanding of lesbian sex is present in these stories: the excitement, curiosity, passion, and intimacy, not the male-oriented spectacle of it, the very clearly orgasm-centric, cum-shot-goal theme of much mainstream lesbian porn. The fact of the matter is, lesbians do not generally have sex so that men can watch, but most lesbian porn behaves this way.

The biggest problem with the lack of mainstream truthful lesbian sex is that we live in the midst of a social revolution, in which gay and lesbian experience is just now beginning to be explored in network television and major motion pictures. There is not a lot out there yet, and whenever anything new is released, the pressure on it is incredibly high. TV shows like “Glee” succeed in that they bring tenderness and honesty to gay love, and humanize the gay experience for their enormous viewer base that includes people who do not understand and are sometimes afraid of LGBTQA people. Creating lovable gays in a popular show is a big deal for many of those viewers who do not know any gay people, and look to characters on the TV to understand the humanness of what has been a foreign, strange idea to them before. The sexual side of these relationships is important to understand, too, and so the kinds of queer porn out there matter, too. Because most young people grow up with porn in the digital age, and sex education exists as a rarity (good, comprehensive sex education nearly nonexistent), many young people learn how to have sex from porn. In a world where sex education is lacking and queer sex education is nonexistent, porn becomes the default teacher for young confused people exploring their sexuality. While heterosexual porn is riddled with its own sexist, piggish issues (violence against

women the most distinctive and destructive), it at least exists with enough volume and variety to create a basic picture of what heterosexual sex looks like. Gay porn can be problematic for similar reasons, and tends to create a heteronormative male/female power dynamic even with two men (or “top” and “bottom”), but it too at least shows men what sex looks like. Lesbian sex is an elusive enough subject on its own, and with the sheer amount of inaccuracy in man-made lesbian porn, lesbians do not have the same sort of education, as skeletal as it is, as gay men and straight people. With men in charge of much of the entertainment industry, and nearly all of the adult entertainment industry, the male experience is one that is easier for the creative minds to fathom and put on screen. Gay porn is more accurate than lesbian porn because men are making both kinds.

Thus queer porn, now still an underground movement, is instrumental to the social revolution that is running a parallel course to the more political “queer rights movement” we are currently undergoing. Normalizing queer sex was Shine Louise Houston’s goal in founding her company, and while mainstream television and films are slowly beginning to pick up on the changes in depicting relationships, porn seems to be lagging behind in illustrating sex. The male fascination with lesbian sex does not seem to be fading, and the male domination of the industry will probably not change anytime soon. As long as there are men to watch it, there will be men to make this fake lesbian porn. The audience and the creator determine everything in filmmaking in general, and to an even more extreme degree with pornography, where the person who directs a film determines the truthfulness of sex. The consequences may not seem major, but they exist: the deep lack of understanding of lesbians and lesbian sex makes growing up as a gay female a difficult and confusing process sexually, even more so than it already is. Stereotypes about lesbians, and the idea that something (a penis) is missing in their sexual lives, are perpetuated in the poorly done mainstream lesbian porn, too. The male-focus of sex continues. The confusion

continues. And with the confusion, the questions. So, for those curious on how lesbians *really* “do it,” do not watch the free stuff; consult queer porn. It is worth the money for the educational purposes alone— and it is quality porn.

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