Epistemology of the Erotic:
Sexual Epistemic Injustice & the Promise of a Feminist Pornography Knowledge Project

Amelia Teske
Department of Philosophy
Department of Gender & Women's Studies
University of Wisconsin - Madison
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Abstract

From Freud to Foucault, philosophers have sought to explore the notions of perversion, pleasure, and power as they function in the production and consumption of pornography, yet there are no current frameworks under which we might establish the distinctively epistemic injustices brought about by pornography and further work to alleviate and prevent these injustices. This project establishes an epistemic injustice framework specifically tailored to sexuality and pleasure, utilizing Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic as a marker of the pleasure that sexual-epistemic agents are effectively blocked from accessing due to the epistemic implications of mainstream pornography. Locating Audre Lorde within the context of the sex wars of the 1970s and 80s while providing a close textual analysis of her 1978 essay, *Uses of the Erotic,* I seek to build a framework for a feminist pornography knowledge project in alignment with her ideology, while addressing the tensions between pornography and the erotic and negotiating her strict anti-pornography stance in favor of an erotically liberatory mode of producing, consuming, and distributing pornography.

I. Introduction

Reviving the debates of the sex wars and recalling the body of feminist work dealing with pornography serves to guide present day feminist writing and interventions centered around pornography. Especially as the landscape of digital pornography has changed drastically in the years since the height of the sex wars, and will continue to grow and develop rapidly with advancements in Artificial Intelligence and increasing dependence of society on technology, it is crucial to diligently recall the complexities, promises, and limits of feminist thinking on pornography so as to best approach the issue. There are both cautionary lessons to be learned from the sex wars, as well as inspiration to be taken from prominent feminist thinkers of the time who pioneered new ways of thinking about sex, sexuality, and pornography. Within the scope of this paper I focus specifically on Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist philosopher and poet whose profound work remains central to the feminist community writ large. Lorde was staunchly anti-pornography, and advocated in particular for the liberation of what she called ***the erotic*** from the abuses of pornography. Lorde's concept of the erotic is crucial to this paper, yet a reinterpretation and negotiation of her anti-pornography stance is also necessary as I posit the potentiality of a feminist pornography knowledge project as a means of liberating the erotic.

I further deepen this analysis and application of past feminist texts and methods pertaining to pornography by adding a deeply philosophical dimension which seeks to establish a framework for understanding pornography and its impact through an epistemological lens. Philosophy of sex and sexuality is a field which has been gradually taken more seriously within

the frame of contemporary philosophy, yet the literature on pornography- and specifically its epistemic implications- is severely lacking. From Foucault to Freud, philosophers have sought to explore the notions of perversion and power as they function in the production and consumption of pornography[1]. Scientists and psychologists have also heavily considered the impact of pornography, with studies ranging from *Pornography Consumption and Cognitive-Affective Distress* (Privera and Bob 2023), to *Using the Integrative Model to Explain How Exposure to Sexual Media Content Influences Adolescent Sexual Behavior* (Bleakly et al. 2011), and many more. Yet, it seems as though there are no current frameworks under which we might establish and reckon with the clear functions of the distinctly epistemic injustices brought about by pornography and further work to alleviate and prevent these injustices. For this reason, it is my goal to develop an epistemic injustice framework, akin to Miranda Fricker's, which specifically addresses the sexual dimensions of epistemic injustice; throughout this paper I will refer to this as a *sexual epistemic injustice framework.* By naming the injustices that happen when an epistemic agent's access to erotic knowledge and knowledge about their own sexual pleasure is cut off, it is my hope that a sexual epistemic injustice framework will shed light on the epistemically troubling aspects of pornography's production, distribution, and consumption and thus provide grounds for renegotiating how we interact with pornography in a way that promotes erotic self-knowledge.

The main arguments and structure of this paper are as follows. Mainstream pornography persistently perpetuates epistemic injustices against all epistemic agents that it reaches even indirectly. This claim is supported by an epistemic injustice framework expanding on Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* (2009) with the added dimension of sex and pleasure as epistemic

[1] See Freud, S. (1905) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* Foucault, M. (1976) *The History of Sexuality vol. 1,* and Kurylo, B. (2017) *Pornography and power in Michel Foucault's thought.*

domains which are subject to a unique form of epistemic injustice, which I call *erotic injustice.* Utilizing Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic, as developed primarily in 1978 essay, *Uses of the Erotic,* I ultimately argue that a feminist pornography knowledge project centered around honoring the erotic can effectively alleviate the negative, erotically abusive epistemic impacts that mainstream pornography has had on sexual-epistemic agents. This argument will address the objections that Lorde has to pornography , negotiating her strict anti-pornography stance in favor of an erotically liberatory mode of producing, consuming, and distributing pornography.

I begin by providing context for debates about pornography with a brief account of the "sex wars" of the 1970s and 80s, identifying the two most recognized 'sides' of the debate and pushing back against that binary narrative by emphasizing the multiplicity of views that were present in the debates at the time. This context is crucial for providing a holistic picture of Audre Lorde's stance on pornography and the erotic, as she is widely recognized as falling under the anti-pornography 'side' of the debates, and her work is referenced in much of the literature which seeks to establish grounds for the necessity of abolishing pornography. Despite her explicit opposition to pornography, Lorde confuses the misleading narrative about the sex wars such that there were only two sides through her complex, intersectional approach to pleasure, sexuality, and the erotic. After bringing in Lorde's framework for understanding the erotic and pornography, and further establishing why it is crucial to this specific project, I move forward with constructing a framework of sexual epistemic injustice which pays special attention to the knowledge of pleasure and the relationship that this specific type of knowledge has with the erotic. As this framework opens up the space for understanding the specific injustices that are brought about by mainstream pornography, it also raises the need for creating methods to combat these injustices. In response to this need, I provide a framework for a feminist pornography

knowledge project which would effectively serve to alleviate and prevent existing and future sexual-epistemic injustices resulting from mainstream pornography. The main requirement which I have placed on this framework is that it must respond to, and grapple with, Lorde's notion of the erotic and seek to successfully liberate it. Thus, I build out a list of potential objections that Lorde would have to the framework based on her own body of work, and respond to each with an explanation of how my framework is in fact aligned with Lorde's (and vice versa).

II. Context of the 'Sex Wars' and the Catfight Narrative.

A comprehensive feminist criticism of pornography has by now already been well established and widely received. The feminist sex wars stretching through much of the 1970s and 80s, into the 90s brought the issue of pornography as problematic to the fore, and feminists and academics have since continued to seek out a solution to the so-called 'problem of pornography'. As will become increasingly clear throughout this analysis, the terminology of 'anti-porn' and 'pro-porn' feminists is not at all fitting for a deep political and philosophical analysis of pornography. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to the central goal of this project to emphasize the multiplicity of views present in the sex wars. All participants with stakes in the debates as feminists had, on a fundamental level, agreed on pornography's power to impact our sexual attitudes and practices as well as our social and political locations in the world. As Bracewell so keenly discusses in Why We Lost the Sex Wars (2021), the false dichotomy of pro-sex versus anti-sex feminists which has been paraded by hegemonic discourses on the issue following the clash of antipornography and sex radical feminists at the 1982 Barnard College conference—"The Scholar and the Feminist 9: Towards a Politics of Sexuality"— wrongly promotes the notion that the sex wars were merely a feminist "cat fight", effectively painting the debates as

simply a matter of angry feminists being incapable of agreeing with each other, when in reality the sprawling debates tackled a vast range of issues from pornography production to the nature and limits of law and contained just as vast a sample of stances and arguments on behalf of feminists and theorists.

Feminists widely recognized for their antipornography stances, like Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Susan Brownmiller, and more, often argued that pornography inherently and necessarily degrades, objectifies, and promotes violence against, and subordination, of women. Brownmiller, for example, explained that "The feminist objection to pornography is based on our belief that pornography represents hatred of women, that pornography's intent is to humiliate, degrade, and dehumanize the female body for the purpose of erotic stimulation and pleasure" (1980, as cited in Bracewell, 2021). Dworkin and MacKinnon even defined pornography as "graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words" (1988). Prior to the sex wars and the uptake of pornography as a serious issue within feminist circles, debates on pornography generally consisted of liberal and conservative viewpoints which tended to focus on the public versus private acceptability of consuming and distributing pornography. Both the liberal and conservative schools of thought varied widely in the views they contained, but liberals generally believed that the private consumption of pornography was perfectly acceptable and not to be infringed upon while the public display and proliferation of pornography may require some form of legal regulation (but not full-fledged censorship), and conservatives on the issue generally felt that both private and public consumption and distribution of pornography was morally bankrupt and often called for censorship. The feminist antipornography stance rejected both of these preceding sets of arguments surrounding pornography, arguing that pornography—from production, to

distribution, to consumption, and so on— is necessarily political, and ought to be defined and regulated according to this political nature rather than the echochamber of conservative moral codes which grounded the immorality of pornography in assertions of "sex as inherently degrading and women as inherently vulnerable" (Bracewell, 9). In this way, antipornography feminists resisted conservative logic by arguing for politically nuanced understandings of pornography, sexuality, and women as opposed to the flattening logic of all sex and all things pertaining to sex as morally questionable. The liberal notion that private consumption of pornography is acceptable and the legal protection of privacy ought to be secures, so long as it doesn't bring about the direct harm of others, was also heavily challenged by antipornography feminists as they fundamentally disagreed with the idea that there is a way to consume pornography and not be complicit with the degradation and subordination of women. Early antipornography feminists and liberals clashed as the former began to advocate for the social and legal condemnation of pornography, while the latter had spent years advocating for the protection of it in its capacity as a private practice or hobby (Bracewell).

Sex-radical feminists, on the other hand, argued that women still desired pornography and deserved to have those desires met, and pushed back against the liberal notions of security and censorship that some of the antipornography feminists upheld. This pushback is the reason that sex-radical feminists are often conflated with the terminology of "pro-pornography", but sex-radical feminism actually first arose as a response to hyper-heteronormativity and as a means of women's and gay liberation, not in response specifically to antipornography feminism. While some sex-radical feminists, Gayle Rubin, for example, went so far as to say that there ought to be a solidarity on behalf of feminists with "sadomasochists," "prostitutes," "hustlers," and even "pedophiles", the more general, foundational belief undergirding the sex-radical feminist

movement was the idea that there needed to be a radical disruption of sexual hierarchy and conceptions of perversion (Rubin, 1979 as quoted in Bracewell, 2021).

This brief description, sampling some of the most prominent views of the sex wars, should serve as testament to the idea that the sex wars was much more complex than is often granted by mainstream discourses on the issue, and in turn that there is an abundance of insight to be found within the history of that cultural moment as to society's dynamic and constantly changing relationship with pornography. Further, it establishes that existing feminist critiques on pornography have dealt largely with non-epistemic dimensions of objectification and oppression, while the distinctly epistemic functions of objectification, oppression, and injustice have been left largely unexplored.

Audre Lorde serves as a prime example of a complication of the false dichotomy of the sex wars narrative with her complex positionality of being committed to the erotic as a tool for social, political, and individual liberation alongside her rejection of the notion that pornography has the capacity to possess and instill within us these powers (in fact she felt that it was an active degradation of these powers). Lorde's theoretical position also challenges the catfight narrative in that she was explicitly anti-pornography but also keenly aware of the dangers of regulating pornography through the law as suggested by many other antipornography feminists. Lorde's theories of the erotic and the sexual cannot be neatly relegated to a pro-sex, pro-pornography or an anti-sex, anti-pornography positionality, and this complexity lends itself to a timely analysis of Lorde which might help us position feminist pornography as a tool for epistemic justice in alignment with her ideas. While Audre Lorde did not use an explicitly epistemological framework in writing about the erotic and pornography, the epistemic implications of them are

made clear through a textual analysis of Uses of the Erotic, and, I argue, the erotic as a concept in relation to sexuality is itself a deeply epistemic one.

III. The Erotic

A simple definition of 'the erotic' is nearly impossible to neatly pin down by nature of the immense and variable power which Lorde recognized it as having. However, a close reading of Uses of the Erotic reveals a long list of what the erotic is, as well as a list of what it is not. The erotic is "deeply female and spiritual", a source of power and information, a life-giving substance, self-affirming, and more. The erotic, importantly, is not pornographic, as Lorde writes: "Pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling." (Lorde, 1978). Lorde felt that pornography enacted serious harms against us, especially against our erotic capacities to love and be loved, to enact change, and to reverently acknowledge the life-force within us. Put simply, Lorde believed that pornography degrades and misappropriates the erotic by nature of its triviality and unintentionality in the sense of its non-commitment to engaging and portraying complex and creative ways of expressing sexuality in favor of socially dominant scripts. Pornography is, according to Lorde, diametrically opposed to the erotic, as it embodies the question of what we do (typically pertaining to sex) as opposed to the question, which Lorde finds drastically more important, of how deeply and profoundly we can experience the things we do. In arguing that "Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness," Lorde establishes the erotic (the power which grants us the capability to feel the sense of satisfaction and completion she refers to) as an epistemic prerequisite for knowing what does and does not serve to bring us closest to a satisfactory, life-affirming fullness

of experience. Similarly, while Lorde clarifies that the erotic is so much more than its sexual dimensions, its power is still necessary for a full elaboration of what sexual experiences and interactions do and do not serve to fulfill our sexual livelihoods in a life-affirming sense (1978, 88). Thus, to apply the erotic as an epistemic prerequisite in its sexual dimension: the erotic is what allows us to know the extent to which we are capable of feeling satisfaction and completion in our sexual/erotic lives, and is therefore a prerequisite for the knowledge of what sorts of experiences will bring us closest to that satisfaction and completion.

As one of the greatest figureheads of the anti-pornography side of the sex wars debates and feminism broadly, Lorde's arguments are necessary to grapple with as we consider the ever changing status of pornography in feminist ideology and praxis. An argument for any sort of positive radical potentialities of pornography must reconcile with Lorde's compelling arguments against pornography rooted in her notion of the erotic, and my own argument will do so upon establishing a sexual epistemic injustice framework that both points out the ways in which mainstream pornography does in fact enact abuses against epistemic agents' erotic capacities and leaves open the possibility for feminist pornography to work against these abuses.

The explicitness with which Lorde identifies the erotic as a source of knowledge lends itself as grounds for attributing a high level of credence to an intentional feminist and political knowledge project geared towards opening up pathways by which sexual-epistemic (or perhaps more fittingly, erotic-epistemic) agents may form deep inner connections with the erotic knowledge within themselves. Considering the prevalence of Miranda Fricker's contributions to epistemology, notably with her coining of the term epistemic injustice, it is only fitting to incorporate Fricker's work into the construction of the sexual epistemic injustice framework at hand. I will utilize key definitions and concepts from Fricker's Epistemic Injustice (2007),

including power, testimonial injustice, and hermeneutical injustice, which are all at work in the culture of pornography. These key definitions and concepts require some adaptation to the specific context of the culture of pornography, which follows from the preliminary work establishing Fricker's framework.

IV. The Need for a Sexual Epistemic Injustice Framework

The idea for a sexual epistemic injustice framework, framing mainstream pornography as an obstacle to knowledge, stems from the idea that many, if not all, consumers of mainstream pornography tend to believe that the pornography they are consuming accurately represents pleasure and sexuality, and adopt the tendencies being represented as knowledge for how they can enact pleasure and sexuality. For example, mainstream pornography overwhelmingly depicts PIV (penis-in-vagina) sex as forceful penile penetration of the vagina, hard and fast, from a cis-man partner into a cis-woman partner as extremely pleasurable for both parties- each partner may perform any number of widely recognizable auditory and visual cues which signal pleasure. This standard form of representing sexuality is so widely proliferated to the extent that it becomes, in essence, the most recognizable and dependable visual icon of sexuality, thus flattening for the consumer the otherwise vast and varied terrain of other sexual and erotic possibilities. In reality, many people that are symbolically represented by the woman in these types of pornography, do not enjoy this method of penetration, or they do enjoy it but they also enjoy a wide range of other methods that are not nearly as represented as this sort of 'hard and fast' mode of penetration is. Further, many sexual-epistemic agents, especially those who are younger and are not granted sufficient sex education, use pornography as a tool for identifying and understanding their own sexuality, desires, and personal experiences, and as a catalyst for their own sexual imaginations (Meehan 2021).

The aforementioned example is a specific instance of what is a much larger issue, such that there is a celebrated standard that pornography perpetuates which represents a very limited view on what pleasure is and looks like while ignoring the variety of sexual interests that are actually embodied by the full community of sexual agents. When someone who has never had sex or realistic sex education (which would ideally be imbued with knowledge of realistic pleasure and the vast array of ways to achieve pleasure for oneself and their partner) consumes this very streamlined, standardized, and unvaried content, and they trust its portrayal as accurate to real-life sexuality and pleasure (which they are more than likely to do), they will implicitly interpret this as new 'knowledge' such that they should penetrate their sexual partner quickly and with much force, or that they should respond to penetration of this nature with the specific 'appropriate' set of faces and noises in response even if they aren't genuinely receiving pleasure from it. Evidence from studies on pornography consumption and sexual behavior support this claim, with findings indicating that an individual's consumption of violent pornography leads to an increased likelihood that they will perpetuate sexual violence, and this is exacerbated by factors related to lack of access to comprehensive sex education and empowering modes of understanding sexuality. For example, in their 2019 study The Association Between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students, Rostad et al. found that, in comparison to their counterparts who did not consume violent pornography teen boys who consumed violent pornography were 2-3 times more likely to report teen domestic violence perpetration, and teen girls who consumed violent pornography were over 1.5 times more likely to report teen domestic violence perpetration. This study highlights Wright's (2011) framework of script acquisition which proposes that individuals acquire or pick up on 'scripts' when viewing pornography, and that these scripts go on to become realized "when portrayals of

sexual roles and behaviors are perceived as normative, acceptable, and gratifying" (Rostad et. al.). Wright's framework is an established means of tracking the process of consuming pornography to interpreting pornography as a guide to sex to applying that guide in sexual interactions, and provides a strong basis for understanding how pornography can perpetuate sexual epistemic injustices. In both positions— perpetrating sexual scripts or being on the receiving end of the perpetration of sexual scripts— a partner is unfortunately missing out on what could be a fantastic sexual and erotic experience filled with true pleasure. They are also, when consuming content that falsely represents pleasure, being effectively blocked from accessing a true knowledge of pleasure, both at the time of the pornography consumption and the time of sexual interaction. Both of these negative results are a direct consequence of the betrayal of erotic imagination and guidance in favor of the consumption of pornography which favors patriarchal, heteronormative sexual relationships and thus perpetuates scripts of that same nature.

Both the Rostad et al. study and Wright's framework serve to highlight the crucial component of the sexual epistemic injustice framework which is that what is portrayed in pornography is often understood as knowledge about sexuality and how to meaningfully engage in sex, and this 'knowledge' is vulnerable to manipulation at the hands of the entities, individuals, and, most importantly, social and cultural systems that produce and distribute pornography. The manipulation of sexual scripts does not always manifest in obvious enactments of violence, but also in more coded and covert exercises of power. The manipulation of sexual scripts need not always be insidious at all, as will be the case with the feminist pornography knowledge project I propose which seeks to liberate pornography viewership from implicit adherence to majoritarian sexual dynamics and power relations that do not actually suit them or their desires.

V. Power

Fricker and Lorde have in common an acute awareness of how power functions in the realm of knowledge, both about the world and about the self. Fricker focuses on two main forms of power- social power and identity power- both of which are as prescient to establishing a sexual-epistemic injustice framework as they were to establishing the original epistemic injustice framework. Pornography, as a body of information about how sex and pleasure look, feel, and are enacted and performed, is indeed an institution of social power and thus of identity power as well. Social power is:

> a practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally. (2007, p. 13)

Identity power is a form of social power, and depends upon shared imaginative conceptions of social identity. Identity power qua gender, for example, depends broadly on a basis of shared conceptions of what it means to be a man, or a woman, or a person who exists outside of those identity labels. A passive example here may look like a man assuming more agency in a sexual encounter with a woman due to his conception of gender and sex such that men 'should' play a more active role and women a more passive one- a dynamic which floods mainstream pornographic representations of heterosexual sex. This exercise of power inherently discredits the woman partner's knowledge of sexual interaction in favor of the simplicity of adhering to a hegemonic idea of how gender and sexuality function in relationships of power.

In the example I provided of identity power, both the man and woman partners possess the erotic within themselves, yet neither of them is realizing it- the erotic power is latent. This is due to the fact that both partners have adopted the hegemonic notion of gender and sexuality

such that men play an active role and women a passive one in their sexual relationships with one another. In this instance, both partners are effectively blocked from accessing their sexual desire outside of mainstream pornographic representations of it because their 'knowledge' of sexual relationships is distorted by the social and identity powers at play which privilege men's sexual decision making and agency over women's. This remains the case even if we imagine that, outside of the distorting system of social and identity powers, both partners desired the same roles that they have adopted within the context of this distorting system; it is not that the roles themselves are inherently oppressive, but the fact that these roles are often necessitated as effects of the ways in which systems of hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality leave knowers 'in the dark' in regards to alternative modes of practicing gender and sexuality.

Having established the Frickerian forms of power that are at work in the epistemology of sex and pleasure and the ways in which they function systematically, it is now crucial to further establish a third distinct form of power which adapts the general epistemic injustice framework to the context of sex, pleasure, and pornography. Lorde acknowledges the erotic itself as a form of power, realized by an acknowledgement of genuine desire: "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (1978, 91). In this sense, the erotic can function as both a social power as it enables us to pursue genuine collective social change, and an identity power as it connects us to the ways in which we allow ourselves to seek out our desires and pleasures. In its capacity to serve both the functions of social power and identity power, the impact and potentiality of the erotic to seek transformation and liberation pushes this form of power beyond the boundaries of social and identity power as they have already been laid out. The erotic serves to enlighten us to the potentiality of everything we

partake in individually and collectively to become varied sites of transformation and liberation. Pornography is just one of these many sites. As a power which reveals to us the extent of genuine pleasure we can take in our lives, the erotic opens us up to radically different ways of interacting with each other and with the world that bring us closer to that fullest extent of pleasure. In the case of pornography specifically, it is the erotic which enables us to see how mainstream pornography fails to embody the vast array of sexual pleasures and desires that exist within each of us, thus motivating us to seek new and better ways of producing and consuming pornography that might actually bring us closer to that fullness of pleasure and being. Engaging the power of the erotic in the context of pornography might look like someone connecting deeply with themself to realize the capacity they have for sexual pleasure and the desires they have which bring them closest to that full capacity, and recognizing that monotonous, mainstream pornography fails not only to bring them as an individual closest to seeking out their own pleasure, but also fails to accurately represent them to the world of other sexual-epistemic agents, thus effectively blocking the intelligibility of their pleasures and desires to themselves and to potential sexual partners. This realization then allows the sexual-epistemic agent to imagine, and create, ways for pornography to accurately represent them and their own pleasures. This creativity has the radical potential to transform and liberate the culture of pornography as a site of sexual intelligibility and pleasure fulfillment.

VI. Epistemic Injustice

For epistemic injustices to occur, Fricker argues, there must be some sort of asymmetrical and unfair operation of power which lends itself to harming an epistemic agent in their capacity as a knower. Fricker outlines two forms of epistemic injustices: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs most notably when a speaker “receives a

credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer; so the central case of testimonial injustice is identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (28). Fricker further elaborates that:

> The idea is rather that prejudice will tend surreptitiously to inflate or deflate the credibility afforded the speaker, and sometimes this will be sufficient to cross the threshold for belief or acceptance so that the hearer's prejudice causes him to miss out on a piece of knowledge. (17)

A working definition of testimonial injustice for the context of a sexual epistemic injustice framework requires some adaptation, as the agents involved in sexual epistemic injustices are often not able to be identified as inhabiting the roles of 'speaker' and 'hearer' and the "testimony" involved can tend to be in a much more abstract sense of the word. Still, though, this idea that prejudices pertaining to sex and sexuality have the capacity to afford sexual partners credibility deficits or credibility excesses in ways that can ultimately cause a partner to miss out on a piece of (sexual, erotic) knowledge feels extremely relevant to an analysis of how pornography influences our sexual encounters and, more fundamentally, our erotic imaginations. For example, a sexual testimonial injustice could occur, in the active sense, when a man assigns low or no credibility to a woman sexual partner by disregarding her communicated sexual desires. It could also occur passively if, for example, the man assumes more dominant roles and fails to make a point to ask about his partner's desires or open up communication about their mutual desires because he has implicitly assumed that she has low sexual credibility, thus not recognizing her capacity to both have and communicate genuine sexual and erotic desires. The internalized sexual testimonial injustices embodied by the passive partners in cases like these are microcosms of the broader, unjust hierarchy of knowing versus feeling, which delegitimizes

erotic feeling as a source of knowledge in favor of the "established" knowledge about sexuality and pleasure embodied by mainstream pornography.

Hermeneutical injustice does not occur on the same sort of individual basis as testimonial injustice does, but rather occurs on a systemic level as a result of broad socio-cultural gaps in knowledge which prevent an epistemic agent from making sense of their own experience. The "primary harm," Fricker explains, "of hermeneutical injustice consists in a *situated* hermeneutical inequality: the concrete situation is such that the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible" (162). Fricker provides the example of workplace sexual assault as an instance in which hermeneutical injustices occurred due to the fact that, prior to the 1980s, there were no comprehensive social or legal frameworks for identifying the unique harms and injustices that happen when sexual harassment and assault occur in the workplace specifically. Every woman who had experienced sexual harassment or assault in the workplace prior to the Equal Employment Opportunity Comission defining sexual harassment as an illegal form of sex discrimination was hermeneutically disadvantaged as they had no framework to realize nor communicate the injustices they were facing. This dimension of the experience— of not being able to recognize or link language to an experience— is an injustice itself. The Combahee River Collective, a collective of Black feminists who banded together in 1974 to engage in political feminist liberatory work, represents an instance of hermeneutical injustice which in a sense catalyzed the genesis of a new "contemporary Black feminism" (BlackPast, 2012). In their 1974 Collective Statement, the collective recognizes:

> Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the

> political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression (BlackPast, 2012).

Black feminists who, perhaps before they even identified themselves as such, were unable to locate concepts such as those named in the above quote, were experiencing hermeneutical injustice as a result of their own sociocultural unintelligibility which rendered their experiences of the injustices of patriarchy and racism invisible to the social collective. In the same sense that Black feminists at the time, including those involved in the Combahee River Collective, were able to "look more deeply into [their] own experiences" in order to coalesce and build a new politics which would explicitly name the injustices they faced and identify ways to liberate themselves from these injustices, those of us facing hermeneutical injustices at the hands of mainstream pornography are empowered by the erotic to look more deeply on our own experiences, name the injustices we face, and identify what is required of us and of society in order to transform our interactions with sexuality and pleasure, ultimately ending the injustices which inhibit those most fulfilling interactions. Hermeneutical injustice in the context culture of mainstream pornography and epistemic injustice could occur, for example, as a result of there being no accessible, accurate representations of pleasure for any given individual in the existing collection of mainstream pornography. If a person is unable to find representations of sexual pleasure that they can identify with, they are likely going to be equally unable to communicate and further bring themselves closer to their own sexual pleasure. This individual is then in a position of situated hermeneutical inequality in the sense that they are unable to make communicatively intelligible to themselves and to potential partners their sexual desires, which are indeed in their interests to be able to communicate, as a result of the situational lack of access to pornography that is accurately representative of their own pleasures.

The alignments and misalignments presented above of Fricker's epistemic injustice framework with this developing sexual epistemic injustice framework thus point towards the utility and necessity of locating a third type of epistemic injustice, with elements of Fricker's definitions of both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, which is adapted for the purposes of identifying the epistemic injustices perpetuated by mainstream pornography and includes the notion of the erotic as a form of power. From Fricker's definition of testimonial injustice, I believe that the aspects of credibility deficit and identify prejudice are useful in identifying the sorts of injustices that arise from the production, distribution, and consumption of mainstream pornography, but the constraint of this type of injustice occurring within purely testimonial forms of communication does not lend itself to identifying the sexual epistemic injustices that often occur in more implicit or embodied forms of communication between sexual-epistemic agents. Similarly, in the case of hermeneutical injustice, the idea such that a significant lacuna in collective social imagination and actual social, cultural, and legal frameworks perpetuates epistemic injustices as a result of the rendered unintelligibility of certain unjust or unfair experiences is extremely useful for the project of locating pornography's epistemic injustices. The aspect of hermeneutical injustice such that there is no single perpetrator enacting these injustices is also extremely useful for a sexual epistemic injustice framework and makes room for the sorts of injustices that I am trying to pinpoint as occurring when someone is effectively stripped of their ability to locate their own sexual desires and pleasures as a result of the epistemic constraints that pornography places on sexual-epistemic agents. Thus, I postulate the notion of "erotic injustice" which occurs when an erotic-epistemic agent is effectively blocked from accessing and communicating their own desires and pleasures. While I am concerned with the context of distinctly sexual epistemic injustices, it is again important to reiterate that the

erotic is not merely sexual, and thus erotic injustice could certainly occur outside the context of sexuality and sexual pleasure.

VII. Pornography According to Lorde: Direct Denial of the Erotic

Lorde made it explicitly clear that she was not in favor of something like a feminist pornography knowledge project, and that "feminist pornography" as a concept itself is an oxymoron. According to Lorde, pornography and the erotic are inherently incompatible, and pornography thus has no progressive political or feminist potential to do anything in service of the erotic. However, the landscape of pornography has changed drastically in the years since the sex wars and the publication of Uses of the Erotic and Lorde's other works in which she discusses the topic of pornography, and it is worth considering whether Lorde would maintain her strict anti-pornography stance in light of these drastic changes. It is further worth considering, regardless of whether or not Lorde would adjust her stance to favor a feminist pornography knowledge project, whether the pornographic and the erotic are indeed necessarily in opposition with one another, or if they might be able to theoretically align with one another under a reimagined, perhaps utopian, pornographic landscape. In what follows, I will identify two key quotes from Lorde's essay which, in conjunction, outline her anti-pornography stance, and elaborate on them in order to establish an understanding of what an erotically liberatory feminist pornography knowledge project must look like.

> "The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we

> have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling" (88).

This quote lays out a few important guidelines for a feminist pornography knowledge project in alignment with Lorde's notion of the erotic. Firstly, it clarifies the necessity of changing the power dynamic of pornography which exists between men and women, such that men are in a position of power to weaponize pornography against women and their erotic identities. A feminist pornography knowledge project, then, must actively put women and other gender-marginalized people in a position of power in the creation, distribution, and consumption of pornography. This need not be, in fact should not be, a shift which fully reverses the present power system of pornography, making it a practice of women weaponizing pornography against men. Second, this passage asserts the necessity for a feminist pornography knowledge project to embrace the "exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information". While Lorde further asserts that pornography is in fact the opposite of this full exploration and consideration of the erotic, the reason she gives for this is that pornography represents the suppression of true feeling. If a feminist pornography knowledge project could acknowledge and embrace 'true feeling', it would theoretically not be in such direct opposition to the erotic.

> "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (88).

This quote exemplifies the ways in which a successful feminist pornography knowledge project must go beyond its attempts to portray "tried and true", singular methods for "achieving" sexual

pleasure. Mainstream pornography might be understood as embodying "a question only of what we do" in its implicit commitments to portraying traditional routines as guides for how to do sex and how to achieve pleasure/orgasm. In order to shift towards a response to the question of "how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing", pornography ought to commit itself to portraying the multiplicity of pleasures and sexual acts embodied by the vast population of people who have sex and take part in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. This shift may take the form of pornography which dedicates itself to more full portrayals of the relationships between actors beyond their sexual interactions, as well as more explicit ways of portraying discussions between sexual partners about what they want and how they feel.

VIII. Feminist Pornography as an Erotically Liberating Knowledge Project

Having established the distinct type of injustice that occurs when an epistemic agent is effectively blocked from accessing their erotic, it is now appropriate to move forward with the ameliorative guidelines that ought to follow in response to an epistemic injustice framework. Adopting a similar framework to Fricker who argues that we ought to strive to be ethically responsible epistemic agents as a way to alleviate and ultimately prevent the harms of epistemic injustices, I argue that there is a way to alleviate the negative impact that pornography has on particular epistemic agents. This method can be considered a feminist pornography knowledge project, in which the cultural collective shifts from the dominant and harmful portrayals of sex that are characteristic of mainstream pornography toward more empowering, diverse, and respectful portrayals of sex so as to expose epistemic agents to more liberating representations of sexuality.

Unlike some proponents of the anti-pornography and anti-sadomasochism sides of the sex wars' debates, I am not interested in trying to parse out any sort of 'higher' or 'lower' pleasures, or make any sort of claim about what is okay or not-okay to take pleasure in. While I don't think it is unimportant to interrogate our pleasures, why we have them, how we enact them, and even which sorts of pleasures are morally permissible to explore in relationships with others, I am much less concerned with establishing a set of moralizing claims about what sorts of pleasures are 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' than I am with emphasizing the fact that it is our responsibility as sexual-epistemic agents to maintain an intentionality and reverence for the erotic when we choose to engage with pornography specifically. The contours of this responsibility are revealed in conversation with the ever changing systems and exercises of erotic injustice, as well as upon deep and intentional reflections on one's own location within the power systems which ultimately perpetuate erotic injustice. One foundational responsibility, though, is that which requires us to be intentional about the ways in which we locate our own pleasures and desires, the ways we identify with and seek to fulfill these pleasures through the consumption of erotic and pornographic content, and the ways that those pleasures impact oneself as well as those other sexual-epistemic agents that one is in community with.

I am ultimately most concerned with advocating for a pornographic knowledge project which positions all sexual agents as consciously desiring agents who are capable of recognizing and communicating their own desires as well as appreciating their partner's desires. Another goal directly related to this is to identify the ways in which our sexual imaginations are constrained by the sexual resources we have access to, like mainstream pornography and misinformed or not fully comprehensive sex education, and consider how we might enable ourselves to imagine more resonant and life affirming modes of sexual fantasy and interaction.

A knowledge project like this must embody not only a system of ethical porn production and distribution, but also a cultural/social shift of the ways in which we engage with pornography and the uptake of sexual knowledge. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect individuals to take up the consistent practice of having a certain level of intentionality when it comes to the pornography they choose to engage with, but I do think that establishing a sort of 'best practices' standard for engaging with pornography (one which will no doubt change over time as feminism and sexual ethics advance) is crucial to the knowledge project of overcoming distinctly sexual epistemic injustices.

The artistic world of feminist pornography has taken off in recent years, with a wide range of feminist porn sites such as PinkLabel.TV, CrashPadSeries.com, Bellesa.co, and more now very easy for users to find and access through quick online searches. These sites generally commit themselves to a feminist ethic of portraying "authentic" (Taormino et al., 2013, p.12) or 'realistic' women and queer sexual encounters and their unique pleasures. A synthesis of the mission statement pages of the aforementioned pornography production companies and sites produces four core commitments of feminist, queer pornography production and distribution: 1. Fair and ethical production processes; 2. Avoiding sexist stereotypes and typical heteronormative tropes; 3. Portraying women in active, agential roles; 4. Centrally featuring womens' pleasure and orgasms. Importantly, the mere self-proclamation of commitment to feminist porn is insufficient for qualifying a porn production company as 'feminist'. It is also unhelpful to perpetuate a false binary notion of alternative production as equivalent to 'good' and mainstream production as equivalent to 'bad', as there are a number of alternative porn production companies which are blatantly anti-feminist and practice patriarchal pornographic practices the

same way that mainstream companies like PornHub do, and there is also potential for mainstream pornography to embody feminist values.

In her introduction to *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013), Tristan Taormino further identifies a number of qualities embodied by feminist pornography, including: contestation and complication, exploration, unsettling of convention, expansion, creation, development, acknowledgement, and more. “Ultimately”, Taormino concludes, “feminist porn considers sexual representation—and its production— a site for resistance, intervention, and change”. The resonances of this framework for understanding feminist pornography with Lorde’s notion of the erotic are undeniable. In what follows, I will highlight current feminist pornography sites and production companies that, I argue, embody the values of the erotic and thus satisfy the requirements for an erotically empowering feminist pornography knowledge project in alignment with Lorde’s philosophy.

Bellesa Films is a Canadian feminist porn site and production company founded in 2017 by Michelle Shnaidman, who recognized her “desire to create a space for women to celebrate their sexuality” after becoming overwhelmed with how “abrasive” the experience of looking at

mainstream porn as a woman was (Kaczmarek, 2017). The Bellesa site highlights that "at least 32% of PornHub's audience is made up of women", that the porn on sites like PornHub is largely in service of men's arousal and women who show up in videos on these sites exist largely to cater to that arousal, and that these women (as well as men, and people of all genders) deserve better, ethical porn. Bellesa is "porn for everyone who wants something **real**" (Bellesa, n.d.). As a site which sets out to create and maintain ethical standards of the pornography that they create and endorse, Bellesa lists twelve key components of ethical pornography: consent, legal age, no incest, chemistry, safety first, communication, by women, pleasure = everything, transparency, no pressure, comfort is a must, and empowerment is the goal. Under the bullet point of ethical porn being "by women", Bellesa clarifies that what they offer is "not exactly 'porn for women—rather, it's porn *by* women, *for* anyone of any gender who wants to watch something real" (Khamala, n.d.). This facet of Bellesa as a porn site and production company resonates deeply with Lorde's erotic, as Lorde recognizes this power as "deeply female" yet simultaneously existing within everyone. Lorde's erotic is not exclusively for women, nor does it exist only in women, but it is guided by female energy in the sense that women are most subjugated by the power systems, such as patriarchy and racism, which dominate the arenas of sexuality and pleasure. Further, the declaration on behalf of Bellesa that it is "porn for everyone who wants something real" serves to push back against Lorde's notion that all pornography emphasizes "plasticized sensation". Bellesa embodies a guidance by the erotic in the sense that it recognizes the power which is realized when we grant creative and erotic power to women and other people subjugated by sexual epistemic injustice. Bellesa is not merely a feminist pornography site, but a site of erotic transformation and liberation.

PinkLabel.TV is a pornography platform, run by Pink and White Productions and created by director Shine Louise Houston in 2012 featuring a “curated collection of indie adult films”. Dir. Houston was inspired to create this platform by the “creativity and originality of the erotic movies she saw at international adult film festivals”, and recognized the need for erotic and pornographic films that challenged “conventional expectations of what sex should look like, with much needed depictions of underrepresented bodies and desires” (PinkLabel.TV, 2023). PinkLabel.TV thus, whether implicitly or not, is a nod towards Lorde’s erotic, which, again, emphasizes the injustices that occur when sexuality and pleasure are represented in overwhelmingly male-serving ways in pornography. The fact that PinkLabel.TV places an emphasis on independent and amateur film creators further challenges the system of mainstream pornography which seeks only to uplift those most profitable forms of pornography, instead focusing on the power held by individuals to self-determine what sexuality and pleasure can look like when they are given the space to create their own pornography outside of the constraints of what is most profitable or most desired by the mainstream public. Director Shine Louise Houston, through Pink and White Productions, also runs CrashPadSeries.com.

CrashPadSeries.com “is the Bay Area hotbed of queer sexuality”, also run by Pink and White Productions under the direction of Ava LaPrima, is another adult content site, specifically geared towards LGBTQ+ audiences, with an emphasis on the “need to create adult content that’s real, that’s respectful and powerful” (CrashPad Series, 2023). Created in 2005 by director Shine Louise Houston, who in 2022 passed the baton to director Ava LaPrima, CrashPad “has long been celebrated by lesbians as a dyke porn site”, yet further elaborates that they exist “as a reflection of queer women’s community” and “feature people of many genders and sexualities — as well as diverse ethnicities, body types and abilities, ages, and experiences”. On their about page, CrashPad emphasizes four main factors that drive their existence as an ethical, feminist pornography production and distribution platform: casting, performer agency and consent, sexual health, and equal pay. With an emphasis on casting people of many diverse identities, CrashPad recenters their pornographic content in the power of the erotic, shifting the power systems of mainstream pornography which seek to serve only majoritized identities. Their further emphasis on performer agency and consent serves to mitigate the sexual epistemic injustices that result from mainstream pornography producing and distributing content which glorifies and sexualizes nonconsensual sexual relationships and interactions. By only producing and distributing pornographic content which represents genuine, consensual desires on behalf of the performers,

CrashPad pushes back against the culture of mainstream pornography which teaches sexual-epistemic agents that non consensuality is sexy, pleasurable, and morally permissible. The requirements for sexual health that CrashPad has in place further serve to improve the educational components of pornography, which tend to be the alternative to formal, comprehensive sex education, which many sexual-epistemic agents lack access to. By requiring "barriers, testing, and communication" CrashPad shifts the culture of mainstream pornography, which overwhelmingly tends to leave out these key components of sexual relationships, to a place of glorifying safer and more ethical practices for sexual encounters and relationships.

Both the PinkLabel and CrashPad websites have an entrance page, which requires users to indicate their consent to the sexually explicit materials on the sites, as well as officially agree that they are 18 years of age or older, that they will not distribute material from the site to any minors, that the content on the site is acceptable to the average adult according to community standards, that users who might be offended by the content on the site are forbidden from accessing it, and that the user assumes full responsibility for their actions. Further, this entrance page offers resources for parents to learn about how they can ensure their childrens' safety on the internet and prevent them from accessing age-inappropriate content. These entrance pages also suggest that "if you are a young person looking for information about sex", you should go to Scarleteen.com, an online resource "wholly dedicated to providing truly comprehensive and highly inclusive sex and relationships education, information, and support that centers young people" (Scarleteen, n.d.). These entrance requirements may seem trivial, but represent a major desire to shift the ways that pornography is used unethically and in ways that promote improper and insufficient sex education through pornography consumption. Entrance requirements like these can serve as major preventions to sexual-epistemic injustices, explicitly identifying that

pornography is not the best way for young people especially to learn about sex, sexuality, and pleasure, instead emphasizing the importance of comprehensive sex education.

LustCinema, a production company for “adult movies & series for lovers of cinema and sex” founded by director Erika Lust. With a focus on “realistic portrayals of sex within broader narratives”, LustCinema content “champion[s] diversity, inclusivity, and workplace safety”. LustCinema stands out from other aforementioned sites and production companies with its specific focus on the monetary aspects of pornography production, seeking to “[reshape] the industry by providing opportunities and increased budgets to directors across genders in the US and Europe”, thus inherently recognizing the ways that we have the capacity to shift the typical, often unethical modes of capitalist production of pornography into the hands of individuals who will promote ethical and feminist modes of engaging with and producing pornography (*Who is Erika Lust?,* n.d.).

Quinn is “the app for audio erotica. Made by women, for the world” (Quinn, n.d.). Quinn founder and CEO, Caroline Spiegel, was inspired to change the culture of pornography after battling with anorexia which caused a lack of libido. After searching for help in pornography to get her libido back up, Spiegel became frustrated with mainstream sites like PornHub and YouPorn which failed to represent her own arousal and unique desires. After looking to alternative forms of erotica, Spiegel fell in love with audio erotica and found that it offered a radical way to prevent the “often degrading visual elements of porn”, allowing consumers “to focus solely on the fantasy at play” (McKenzie, 2022). By facilitating a complete subversion of the visual culture of mainstream pornography, Spiegel and her app, Quinn, open up the possibility of radical, erotically liberatory modes of engaging with sexual desire and pleasure that does not feed into the visual degradation of the erotic subjects of pornography.

The porn sites and production companies I have brought in here represent just a few of the commendable efforts to dramatically change the culture of mainstream pornography which perpetuates sexual-epistemic injustices. In every case presented above, the founders and directors behind each project connected deeply with themselves to realize the gaps in pornography that served to subjugate and make invisible their pleasures and desires, allowing them to pinpoint the need for a shift in the power systems that dominate the world of pornography and pleasure. In this sense, these porn sites and production companies represent embodiments of the erotic as a power to feel the full extent to which we can experience pleasure and desire and thus identify the systems in place that fail to facilitate these most fulfilling engagements with pleasure and desire. By explicitly naming the injustices and gaps present in mainstream pornography, these sites not

only open the eyes of consumers to the erotic injustices that they themselves are experiencing as a result of the severe gaps in mainstream pornography pertaining to diverse representations of pleasure, but also shift the mainstream culture itself by opening up sites of social and political transformation which seeks to serve those sexual-epistemic agents which are minoritized and underserved by the culture of mainstream pornography. These sites and companies are undoubtedly in alignment with Lorde's erotic in a number of ways, some more explicitly than others, and thus push back against Lorde's notion that pornography is inherently opposed to and inherently degrades the erotic.

IX. Conclusion

So, how does pornography perpetuate epistemic injustices against individuals in their capacity as erotic agents? And how can a feminist pornography knowledge project alleviate these injustices, and further prevent them from occurring? In summary, mainstream pornography functions as a tool of power— both social power and identity power— which proliferates and upholds harmful, patriarchal standards for sex and sexuality rooted in the broader systems of oppression and injustice that are enacted in society. Mainstream pornography consistently adheres to hegemonic notions of what sex and sexuality 'should' look like and how they 'should' be enacted and embodied. Gendered and racialized notions of who plays active versus passive roles in sexual encounters, what pleasure looks and sounds like in an embodied sense, and when a sex act 'ends' in relation to an orgasm are all at work in every instance of pornography, and in mainstream pornography the ways these notions show up are most often in alignment with power systems of patriarchy, racism, etc. which leaves out the potential for more creative, pleasurable, and overall erotically liberating modes of practicing sexuality, especially for folks who are at the

margins of, and subjugated by those systems of power. When we, as erotic-epistemic agents, interact with these types of mainstream pornography, we gradually close ourselves off to sexual encounters and modes of sexuality that are guided by the erotic within us as we become increasingly aligned with the collective social imagination which is intimately tied up with forms of social and identity power that perpetuate oppressive ways of thinking about and engaging with sexuality, pleasure, and pornography. To act as a virtuous erotic-epistemic agent is to approach an understanding of one's own and of others' desires with intentionality and an understanding of the ways that power systems disproportionately normalize certain modes of accessing 'pleasure'. A feminist pornography knowledge project serves as a crucial pillar of this epistemic virtuosity, allowing for erotic-epistemic agents to access their own genuine pleasures devoid of the influences of patriarchal, heteronormative, etc. powers and to seek out these pleasures with themselves and with others in a responsible, ethical way that most importantly is liberatory of the erotic.

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