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Shaping pleasure, shifting boundaries: a roundtable on the future of porn studies

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ABSTRACT

The roundtable, 'Shaping Pleasure, Shifting Boundaries: A Roundtable on the Future of Porn Studies,' took place in June 2024 via Zoom and was recorded, transcribed and then edited to cut digressions and repetitions for publication. The roundtable was intended to examine the transformative trajectory of porn studies over the last decade. With a focus on technological innovations, ethical challenges, and the labour dynamics reshaping the field, the following discussion explores how intersectionality and diverse methodologies have broadened perspectives within porn studies. Our participants also talked about the rise of platforms like OnlyFans, the impact of archival gaps, and the continuing critical tension between pleasure and danger in academic and cultural narratives. Their conversation underscores the necessity of rethinking traditional paradigms while advocating for inclusivity and the preservation of pornographic histories as part of broader cultural heritage. This conversation sets the stage for envisioning the discipline's future as it navigates a rapidly evolving sociopolitical and technological landscape.

KEYWORDS

Pornography; porn studies; Porn Studies journal; Sexuality and Media Studies

Introduction

In the last decade, porn studies as a scholarly discipline has experienced transformative growth, both in terms of the subjects it addresses and the methodologies it employs. This roundtable brings together four important scholars in the field to reflect on the technological, ethical, and labour developments that have redefined porn studies. Our panellists bring a wealth of expertise across gender, sexuality, and media studies. Peter Alilunas investigates the production, regulation, and cultural significance of adult media, tracing its history and broader implications for media and culture. João Florêncio draws on queer studies, media studies, and visual culture to explore how the queer body has been produced and contested as a site of creative and affective sexual world-making. Angela Jones specializes in African American political thought, sex work, race, gender, feminist theory, Black feminisms, and queer methodologies. Susanna Paasonen focuses on internet research, affect inquiry, and sexuality studies, with her work expanding into media history, materiality, and pornography. Their discussion touches on the rapid evolution of digital platforms like OnlyFans and their implications for labour, the broadening

of academic perspectives to include more diverse perspectives and voices, and the role of intersectionality in reshaping both the porn industry and its study. Our contributors also explore challenges facing the field, from historical archival gaps to political and economic pressures that threaten its future. Porn studies has expanded beyond mere representations of sexual content to encompass broader questions of labour, identity, and political economy, setting the stage for the field's future evolution.

Discussion

Feona: I think you all know the reason we're here today – it's been 10 years of *Porn Studies* as a journal, and as part of our anniversary we've been involved in a variety of projects: interviewing people, and publishing wonderful work, some of which you have contributed to. As part of this milestone, we wanted to organize three panels to discuss key themes in the field. We chose to focus on Black porn studies, labour, and the future of porn studies. The first two topics were areas we felt were significant gaps in the journal – subjects that hadn't been written about as extensively as we'd hoped. We've finished those panels, and now we're here to talk about the future of porn studies.

We've selected each of you from a long list of potential contributors because we believe you all bring different and intriguing perspectives on what porn studies is, was, and might become. The question I'd like each of you to address is: what have been the key developments in porn studies over the past decade, and what do they mean to you personally? What are the developments that have influenced your own work, excited you, whether it's a particular piece of writing, a book, a theme, an approach, or a research project? So, Peter, can we start with you?

Peter: First, let me say I'm very happy to be here, especially with this group of folks. I'm delighted to be on a roundtable about the future because it's not something I think about that much. My work is all in deep history, so this is giving me a chance to reflect on what that means for me. I made a long list of things that I thought were key developments over the last 10 years, but the one that really stands out to me and my own work is the rapid technological change that has happened in that time.

That's of particular interest to me because of my current project, which is tracing the pre-history of online pornography. I increasingly get drawn into these questions about the future the more I look into the past, at these obscure little historical moments of how, for example, porn was showing up on radar screens in World War Two, and now how we are rapidly moving into the era of AI.

But of course, there's so many other things too. The massively important rise of discourses about ethics and intersectionality and connecting those to historical analysis. All of the work in those areas that has happened in the last 10 years in our field is incredible.

Susanna: Well, that's a big question. For me it's mainly about the people who've entered porn studies in the last decade or so. Some 20 years ago it was not particularly overcrowded, this field of ours; there was not much to go on in terms of research already out there. The scholars that have entered the field since then have diversified it in

terms of who writes about what. And it's not just about the US, Australia and bits of Europe at this point.

For example, my own research has, during the past few years or so, been inspired by questions connected to platform governance, platform power, labour and work. And this work is happening in Brazil, it's happening in different bits of Europe, it's happening here and there. I would say that porn studies is certainly much less lonely and much more interesting than it was 20 years ago. Sure, it was fun already a decade ago, but also small enough to feel incestuous.

João: I wasn't working in porn studies 20 years ago, but I am working with the work that those who were working then have produced and put out. Being younger in the field, I think one thing I've noticed is a kind of move beyond historicity or historiographies of porn. Maybe I'm also talking about the things that interest me, but moving beyond just historicizing pornography to thinking with pornography about other questions that pornography speaks to and kind of acts upon or interacts with. Obviously, the matter of technology has already come up, particularly the relationships between the body, sexual pleasure and technology that I think both Peter and Susanna were hinting at.

Added to that, there's also a broadening of the field of what porn studies is to the extent that porn either appears or is said to appear beyond, you know, the traditional frame of pornography, of porn as genre or of pornographic media. Porn has also become a rather democratized practice maybe due to increased access to new platforms and new modes of producing content.

So I think there's that kind of broadening of the field, both in terms of methodologies of what porn studies does and also regarding its object of study.

Angela: I'll join in and echo what many of you have already said and that I think a lot about this question of broadening what it means to do porn studies and how a lot of that is a direct reflection of what's changing in porn industries themselves. And so, when I think about some of these critical shifts, I think about the diversification and expansion of porn industries online and how significant that's been. The development of amateur porn online is not particularly new, but I think the number of platforms for hosting pornographic content has grown far beyond just simple tube sites.

In my work, I've examined the growth of camsites and the demand for different kinds of interactive pornographic shows. It is critical to examine these newer opportunities for workers and clients to collaborate on content creation. What, for me, has also been really interesting is not just the growth of spaces for content creators to host and market their content, but the creation of platforms created by sex workers for sex workers. So, for example, platforms like Just4Fans is an alternative to OnlyFans.

And so, I really appreciate the diversification of pornographic industries and the democratization of porn. More and more workers who were traditionally shut out of traditional studio porn, have now found spaces online, which have also allowed them to recoup profits previously taken by sex entrepreneurs. For example, in my research, I have interviewed disabled porn performers and other sex workers, who have discussed how they are reshaping notions of desirability in porn, and how this labour allows them to honour their corporeal needs in ways that most ableist vanilla work does not. While no capitalist industry is a utopia, and no job is always satisfying, many of the disabled

porn performers, who were also trans, talked about finding opportunities for affirmation and pleasure in their labour.

The shifts in online pornographic industries have been extensive and I'll talk more about this later, but the most significant and critical shift in porn studies has been attention to political economy and like Heather Berg (2021) asking us to study and analyze porn workers and porn as work, not just as a cultural product. So, for me, the most intellectual and political value shift in porn studies has also been methodological – that is, not just analyzing the content of porn itself, but interviewing and centring the voices of the porn workers who labour in exploitative porn markets.

João: I have a question for Suzanne and Angela, because you both mentioned platforms and Angela mentioned labour too.

It's something that I find with my undergraduate students. When they are writing about porn, they all tend to want to write about the new platforms, about OnlyFans because their brother or their siblings have an OnlyFans account and they are extremely fascinated because they're so sex positive and that it's so great that all of that happens. Yet, because you both work more directly with this kind of intersection of labour and platform economies, what is at stake here? What are the questions, the urgent or emergent questions that come to the field, or that have come to the field, when we think about porn and labour in relation to the new porn platform economy and gig economy? Because there's complications here too, right? What do you think about it?

Susanna: Do you want to go first? Angela, I'll be a bit boring, I think.

Angela: Sure. I'll jump in. So I don't want to latch on to a part of your question that maybe you weren't as interested in, but when I talk to my students, they so want to talk about OnlyFans and there's sometimes almost a kind of romanticization that's happening around these industries and so I guess the first thing that I say to my students that I will say all day long is that none of these platforms are any kind of utopia, not economic, not feminist, not queer. Period. Full stop. I think it's interesting the number of opportunities that they do open up for people, for employment but at the same time, when we look empirically at earnings, most folks are not making high wages on these platforms. And I think it's really important to think about people's experiences on them intersectionally. So, one of the things that data continues to show us over and over and over again is that there are indeed people who are doing really well on these platforms. Absolutely. But it's also not a coincidence that they are disproportionately young, cisgender, white women from the Global North, and disproportionately from the US, Canada, UK, but disproportionately from the US and lots of other folks, especially people of colour, specifically Black folks are often disadvantaged by sexual racism in these industries. Most people who try platforms like OnlyFans are not making a fortune, and stigma is still a real issue. We have seen many cases in the news alone about porn workers losing a daytime or other job because someone saw their OnlyFans.

Horatio Alger dies hard for most folks on these platforms, and I think it's important to continue to think about issues around exploitation and exclusion. So, I'm always going to come back to political economy and thinking about the labour exploitation that's

happening on these platforms. Again, what interests me so much are the attempts of sex workers to circumvent exploitation. Not just in Just4Fans but when I think about other sex markets, for example, Tryst is an alternative to Eros. The way that sex workers are trying to take back control of their labour and profits is something I think porn studies scholars should be looking at.

Susanna: The position of sex is a pretty unhappy one on most commercial online platforms. Leading social media platforms are certainly key examples of the deplatforming of sex where all kinds of nudity become conflated with sexuality and then sexuality becomes conflated with potential harm and effaced from view as risky and possibly dangerous. OnlyFans emerged as this sort of happy alternative: finally, someone is doing things right! It's not bad like porn otherwise! Yet of course things are much more complicated.

What interests me is a kind of cross-platform understanding of what pockets there are for doing things with and around sexuality and how those pockets might overlap or remain distinct. Plus, the different kinds of limitations that they have, as well as the different forms of agency that they enable at the same time as they constrain what people can do and how they can monetize their stuff. I've been approaching this from the perspective of media ecology, or social media ecology, trying to see how sexual content fits in there, or fails to fit, and how that's changed; although things have not always been peachy for sexual content, governance mechanisms have transformed.

If we think of the financial deplatforming that's happening with payment systems in very, very concrete ways, there's strong irony to it – after all, how were those online payment systems developed, for what needs, in the 1990s? It was not for the gamers. Maybe slightly for eBay, but really it was largely for porn, and this is something we've long known. The marking of sexual content producers as high-risk customers paying higher fees has meant that they've supported the systems disproportionately, and now they're becoming ousted as disposable reputational liability. So, I've been concerned with how porn, and sexual content more broadly, weaves in and out of platform economies and ecologies.

And then I've also been fixated on the question of what porn might be, or mean (Paasonen 2024). As live performance, webcamming, for example, doesn't really fit the traditional notions of what porn is. For the past couple of years we've been studying local Nordic and Baltic sexual platforms for kinksters, swingers, and self-identified perverts with Katrin Tiidenberg, Jenny Sundén and Maria Vihlman (Paasonen et al. 2023; Tiidenberg et al. 2023; Sundén et al. 2024), including people who publish stuff for free under different kinds of constraints and don't really evoke the term porn to discuss what they're doing. They might publish porn, but then it's on OnlyFans or Pornhub and adheres to a particular aesthetic, whereas on those platforms it's about something else, like self-expression. We've been interested in what happens if we consider sexual platforms as social media: how they may help us to see the construction of risk in connection to sexuality differently, and how they make evident the value of sexual sociality, or the value of the sexual within the social in a moment when mainstream social media tries its best to oust it.

Peter: I think Angela is really onto something talking about political economy and I just want to add to this by saying that platforms are, in a long view, fleeting and they're

temporary and so we tend in the moment to want to focus on the importance of this one or that one, but in a really long historical view, they all eventually go away and are replaced by something else. We absolutely know, historically, that all industries eventually jettison porn when they want to start making more money, so if they have an opportunity to increase their profit potential, they will pivot away from it.

We've seen it time and time again in every industry and so that's why I'm always interested in detecting those little trace moments when companies are about to make that pivot, when they're about to jettison things as quickly as they can. That's why when you see outlier moments when they *don't* do that, that's extremely interesting and things we should be watching closely.

To Susanna's point about redefining the word itself, that's another thing that always happens. People continually want to shift the meaning or move away from what something means to redefine it. I love the idea of 'it's not Pornhub, it's better'. It's *different*, implying old meanings can be abandoned in favour of new ones. These are really important questions.

Angela: Yeah, if I may for a second. So you all have my brain working overtime. So, I was thinking when you were both just talking, about the governance of platforms and Peter, so if they're fleeting and they're moving, what are the kind of political circumstances, the kind of geopolitical circumstances that are causing these shifts in the platforms? Or if they're disappearing and when we think about deplatforming and the governance of these platforms themselves, I think a lot about the upsurge in anti-sex work and anti-porn movements and how the work that a lot of those groups are doing are shaping what's happening in this industry. So, I'm just flagging that as something that I wonder if others think is important for us, as porn scholars to talk about. Here in the US, the National Centre for Sexual Exploitation is constantly publishing their dirty dozens list and incessantly attacking these platforms. I think about banking systems and how major credit card companies and payment processors refuse to process payments for porn and other forms of sex work, and the adverse impacts being shut out of the entire financial system has on porn workers to simply live, to acquire housing, and so on. So much of this happening precisely because of the influence of the anti-porn lobby, who are acting in bad faith, often trading in unscientific or bad data, and in really harmful ways. And so, I wonder if that is also something for us to be thinking about, what's going on politically in anti-porn movements and how that's affecting what's going on in porn industries and then subsequently the work that porn scholars are doing.

Susanna: I would say yes, absolutely. It plays out differently, obviously, in different places. João is now in Sweden where anti-porn feminist voices have grown vocal (and some even TERF-y), which is different than here in Finland, just around the corner. But if you think of the leading platforms and ones that want to operate in the US, they must comply with SESTA/FOSTA. Even in countries where sex work is legal – in different ways and to different degrees – the online presences of people doing commercial sex become articulated through and have to conform to these frameworks articulated in the US.

I find it very difficult to talk about porn without talking about the people who are making it, as well as the conditions available to them for actually making a living with

what they do. Thinking about the last decade, while production studies is not huge in porn studies, there has been important work, by Heather and others. Yet we really don't know much about porn production in different parts of Europe, either historically or in the present. We have lots of assumptions about what's happening in Hungary or the Czech Republic, but there's really very little empirical stuff.

And production is also difficult to study historically. Like print porn in the Finnish context: who were the models? How were they paid? What was the deal? There are no archives left. We might be able to do an oral history project but the likelihood of models participating in it might be very minimal.

Feona: I'm sorry, I did say I wouldn't interrupt but the panel that we had on porn labour last week included Heather Berg, Sophie Pezzutto and Zahra Stardust (2025), which we'd wanted to do because nobody sends articles on labour or porn production. It's just not there. So, is it just about it being really difficult to research that stuff or is it a huge black hole? Even as these are the most important and interesting things we ought to be talking about!

Peter: I'm really interested to hear that, Feona, because when I talk to my students, that's what they're most passionate about.

And I feel like that's such an area of interest. Just speaking in the United States-based context, that is an area of interest and growth. So to hear that *Porn Studies* isn't receiving articles about it, it's just fascinating to me. I wonder if you will eventually because there's so much interest in that area. I can't get a lot of traction with my students to talk about history, which is my personal passion. But to talk about labour issues right now in the industry? That's all they want to talk about.

Angela: Again, speaking to the US context, I have the same experience as Peter and there is no shortage of people who want to do this work or more people are doing this work. I think some of this might reflect disciplinary boundaries and our disciplines. Because I know a lot of the students that I work with, they're being encouraged and very often by advisors to submit to generalist journals in their field. For example, if studying porn workers, being told they should submit to a top tier journal on work and occupation, and not an amazing journal like *Porn Studies*. So this goes back to the beginning of our conversation, what does it mean to do porn studies and that some of the folks that you're trying to capture don't necessarily understand that their work is a good fit for *Porn Studies*.

Peter: That's always been a challenge in our field for some people to understand that our work isn't just describing the content of adult films. The first misconception is, oh you just watch porn movies all day.

Angela's really onto something there about *Porn Studies* being perceived in certain ways. I know anytime I give a public talk where I reference the journal or I reference something I've published in the journal, the reaction is that people stop for a second and they're like, wait, there's a journal? How could there be a journal for that? What, you're just talking about porn?

João: Again, speaking of students, maybe my personal experience may speak more to what Susanna was talking about, the relationship between nudity, sex, pornography and danger. I think the vast majority of my straight students seem to be interested in the danger of porn, and it's quite complicated to even try to articulate or to bring other ideas. Not that the ideas of danger or risk are not important, but that seems to always be the first thing they think when they think about porn. Not only when they think about porn as a subject of study, but also when they, and I'm thinking about straight girls here, talk about the fear they have of their boyfriend's porn consumption. And male students too coming to me because they know I work on pornography to ask for advice because they think they're addicted to porn, that they've been struggling with their porn consumption. Even at postgraduate level I find myself trying to complicate narratives on the assumed causal relation between pornographic consumption and, for instance, tendencies to commit sexual assault. This still comes up a lot in gender studies' postgraduate work.

So, at this point there's certainly the political economy, but there's also a kind of political discourse, and I'm unsure if it's about porn per se or if it's a particular kind of backlash against sex and sexuality more generally. I sometimes wonder if the very important and legitimate work that has been done, for instance in university campuses, to prevent sexual violence ended up been bureaucratized in such a way by institutions that the only information students get on campus about sex, especially if you are a woman or if you pass as a woman, is that sex is going to be a place of danger and that your agency in sex is just to say yes or no to someone else's desire. This, again, is something that has been brought to my attention by students themselves, who felt very anxious at being interpellated by consent campaign posters on campus which left women especially disturbed and anxious at the messages that were being put out to supposedly protect them.

Maybe that's also another important thing that has changed maybe not in porn studies, but which affects porn studies. That is, in the last 10 years, a rightful and much needed growing attention to sexual violence has somehow ended up producing a whole set of discourses that see sex primarily as a dangerous thing, or as a site of pain, rather than a site of potential pleasure and joy.

I brought this up with my past employer in the UK, at the many meetings about student consent training that I sat at, because I was a little homosexual working on sex. Every time I suggested the possibility of offering a first-year course in which we'd teach students about sex as a site of pleasure, sex as a site of enjoyment, of intimacy, of discovering one another and all of that, the response was always 'No, we need to tell them about rape. We're going to tell them about rape and about consent, and that's what we will teach them!' So I think the mass availability of sex, by which I mean pornography, triggered a spiral of negative feedback loops where sex is only seen as something dangerous, leading to campaigns warning about the dangers of sex which in turn lead to sex further being seen only as danger. It makes it extremely difficult to break the loop, and sex becomes a self-fulfilling threat of violence.

Susanna: That's a really good point. And I think in the aftermath of #MeToo there's been a really, at least for me, an interesting return to older arguments. I was a child of the '90s academia, and we were told not to use certain totalizing terms like 'the patriarchy' since things are always going to be more complex, and you need to think about what

you're saying when you're using that term, and you should be mindful to context and nuance. And now this vocabulary of the '70s and early '80s really seems to speak to people and resonate anew. Think of the Barbie movie, the endless repetition of 'patriarchy' within it – it clearly does speak to something, not just in the US, but also beyond.

This comes with the risk of turning away from the critical discussions on why you might not want to use patriarchy as the go-to word, and why more nuance might be needed: like, intersectionality might play a role here. #MeToo has been absolutely necessary yet there's an intellectual expense to this re-emergence of discourse – the patriarchy, the objectification of women – and its re-popularization. We have been critiquing binary gender models and heteronormative templates for a long time, but which we clearly have not dealt with in the sense of moving beyond them, given their prevalence today, despite everything. I've been interested in this kind of popular resonance of something like Andrea Dworkin's (1981) work, in the 2020s. We talked about this with Clarissa, Feona, Alan McKee and John Mercer when writing the *Objectification* book (Paasonen et al. 2020); how people who really feel for these arguments may be in their 20s. So, there's almost like a temporal fold in a way, but then clearly there are things that remain to be dealt with (think sexism), which helps to explain the rhetorical appeal of generalized stances and firm arguments.

In contemporary discussions, things labelled as sex positive become framed as kind of naïve, as if sex positivity just means saying yes to everything: as in we want you to have all the sex, with anyone, all the time! It is odd how people who aren't approaching sex as a problem by default become discursively cast as some dangerous conspirators grooming young people into consenting to stuff that they should never do. Sexual experimentation and discovery are not really on the table in this framework.

Angela: I'll be relatively brief, but I think this is one of the most exciting shifts in porn studies for me, which is to say, I think that in the past decade, certainly 15 years, there's been a lot of work that addresses this tension and rethinks this pleasure/danger framework. And I think the most exciting work for me has been in the development of Black erotics and specifically Black feminist theorizing and intersectional theorizing that says, hey, wait a minute: we can simultaneously – wait for it – we can simultaneously hold systems of power up for scrutiny and deep analysis and, at the same time, make space for agency, pleasure and joy. And so, I think it's an especially important point that when we're thinking about the growth and shifts and key shifts and key changes in porn studies, that we are reading and engaging with the development of Black erotics and Black feminist theorizing. Thank you to Jennifer Nash (2014). And thank you to Mireille Miller-Young (2014). And thank you to all of the Black feminists who have brought agency and pleasure into our critical examinations of porn.

Peter: I'm glad that you brought that up, because, speaking for myself, Mirielle's book was a paradigm-changing moment. But, Susanna, I really love your descriptor, the temporal fold. That's going to stay with me because I feel like that's a really good way to understand some things that have been happening that are sometimes bizarre and bewildering. And when you say porn hasn't been dealt with, that's just going to happen again, because this is going to fold again later and the shift still will not have been dealt with, so it's just going to cycle back again. But what I really wanted to say was this pleasure/danger thing that

João brought up, which is useful. Thinking about this journal going forward there's another word too, which is suspicion. Suspicion around porn is such a sticky residue. It never goes away, it's always there no matter what. Even in our work, it's so rare as scholars to talk about the potential of pleasure and joy and happiness like you're talking about. It's so rare it almost doesn't happen at all, but when it does happen, it's almost kind of weird. It would be great if, in our field, in the next 10 years, that wasn't so weird anymore, if people found more opportunities to be flipping that around, like making the topic less suspicious and more joyful.

João: Maybe there's the problem? I'm finishing a book on cruising with a friend who's an artist and we often joke that the problem is that academics who write about sex never have the sex they write about! That doesn't mean that porn scholars would have to go into porn, but maybe we could be more joyful and allow ourselves to take pleasure in our own scholarship in a way that is more evident.

Peter: I just published a piece recently in the journal and I had a little section in there where I did talk a little bit about a joyful moment watching porn (Alilunas 2024). I wasn't sure at first if I wanted to include that section. But then I thought, absolutely! I think we should do more of that. I think it would be good for people to see that it's real.

João: Yeah. And there's a sense of life.

Feona: We need to have a special issue on this. I think joy would make a great special issue.

João: Again, when I grew up, porn was not so much dangerous as it was hard to find. You had to go and find the place where your father used to hide his porn. And there were these amazing moments of school friends, and not just boys, sharing the porn they had brought from their parents. They were real moments of titillating discovery and naivety that were so beautiful in some way because you were like, 'whoa, here's a box of treasures!' And, you know, then growing up, I think pornography became really important to me as a gay man in many ways. Maybe less so now … Since I've started writing about it, it has actually become less joyful. It has become a lot more, you know, 'Oh, what is going on here and how am I going to think about this? How am I going to theorize or historicize it?' There must be a way, and I also must try to do that myself when writing about sex and pornography, that the writing doesn't take away the thing that porn is supposed to deliver, which is what Susanna called its 'carnal resonance'. We must try to keep some of that, some of our embodied responses to the material, as colours in the writing.

Susanna: Joy and excitement were definitely present in the oral history project we did a while back together with the Finnish Literary Society's Folklore archives. We asked people to basically tell us what they meant with porn, or how they understood porn, and what they remembered of it in different moments in their lives (Paasonen et al. 2015). The oldest participants were born in the 1930s and the youngest ones in the '80s, and most of them found it easiest to reminiscence their childhood. With the exception of being found out watching or reading porn, which was generally a bad memory, they

spoke of the excitement of having found porn stashes at 10–11 years old. I think in the UK it's called hedge porn but in Finland it's in the woods, so woods porn. So, people remembered finding these stashes, creating and curating them often at a fairly young age. This was described as very much social activity involving excitement and joy – people spoke much less about the content than about the joy of secrecy. The joy of doing 'the bad thing' really came across.

It's a crucial question how we read and what we read out from empirical research materials, what we focus on and whether we try to describe moments of joy as being about joy, rather than about something else. For example, when people reminiscence along the lines of 'I was a feisty one, you know, it was very cold out. I had a moped. I drove for an hour to buy this magazine.' Like, oh boy, that was really good. It's important to consider how we write about such experiences, which connects to a broader question of joy in popular culture studies where, historically, killing some of it has been a way of making things more respectable and palatable. And then the risks are slightly different with porn, given that it's seen as even worse than most other forms of pop culture – smut, scum, and all that. Our tactics of reading and writing really matter when it comes to mediating some of the joy. Joy is always going to die, one way or another, but how to try to convey some of that remains pivotal in terms of understanding that which we study.

João: I'm just going to add something else, very briefly, which I've been noticing with the gay porn history project I'm carrying out at the moment. That is, people who remember with such a big twinkle in their eyes where they used to hide their stash of porn magazines. They also still remember where they used to go to buy them, they had to go outside of the village to the farthest shop so they would not be recognized.

We've been thinking about the kinds of porn archives that we have, especially queer porn archives that only exist because people loved these things as artefacts, they bought them and they kept them. I was interviewing this guy who has what must be the biggest archive of printed gay porn in Italy, and he apparently has this thing because he started buying those magazines at 13 and hasn't stopped since. He didn't realize what he was doing, but he was buying and archiving both contemporary and older magazines and now he has this massive collection that has just become formally recognized as a public archive by his local public authority. And people archive digital pornography still today and have like gigabytes and gigabytes of porn that they watched once and just put aside to keep. Even in our digital era porn is still treated by some very materially as a kind of a fetish object, as something you want to have and collect and archive just for the sake of having it. There's joy in that, real archival joy, right? It is these histories of joyful personal archiving that allows for our work as porn researchers to exist.

Angela: I love it! Archival joy. I think there's so much joy – just to add a kind of different perspective. Joy comes up in my work all of the time. And I think, to be honest with you, as somebody who primarily works with marginalized populations of people, sure, folks talk a lot about racism and transphobia and cissexism and ableism but what's interesting is across those conversations, the extent to which people talk about their capacity for joy

and their experiences of joy and their labour specifically because of who they are and because of their subjectivities, because of their body, because of their embodiment. For example in my interviews with trans sex workers globally, some folks that I spoke to said, 'Of course there are moments where I hate my job, where I'm being exploited, where people want to reproduce transmisogyny and other toxic tropes, but there are these moments where I'm experiencing deep, deep joy and not any form of dysphoria, but rather gender euphoria and these are spaces for me to find deep affirmation.' And that's a theme that I wrote about in my *Porn Studies* piece which specifically focuses on transmasculine and non-binary people in porn industries (Jones 2021). They say, look there is such a paucity of pornographic materials that feature people who look like me and embody this identity, that there's such affirmation when other young trans guys, then message me and say 'It's not until recently that I've seen other trans dudes or other non-binary people in these industries and how affirming that is.' And there's such joy when you know you're working in an area that's pushing boundaries and that's challenging an industry that has traditionally not celebrated those bodies. As I mentioned earlier, I talked to disabled performers who were like, 'Look, I love being able to crip this industry' and there's a lot of joy and affirmation in that and especially in their interactions with consumers who validate and affirm them.

Peter: I'm thinking about a thing that's come up in the last few minutes, which is this notion of the archive. A friend – an expert in archival studies – and I have gone back and forth with some disagreements about the definition of an archive. He argued at a conference that Pornhub is a significant and important archive, and I disagreed. Pornhub isn't an archive, it's a website that eventually will not exist, and everything on it will not exist, and he and I have at times since had spirited, good-natured disagreements about it. But I maintain that belief even though I acknowledge the definition can be broad. The archive is something that I do worry a lot about with the future of our field. João, you said people have these digital archives and that they're material, but I worry about those because 20–30 years from now, will we even be able to access those files? When Chuck Kleinhans passed away, I helped his partner Julia Lesage donate his materials to the Sexual Representation Collection at the University of Toronto. In there was his hard drive, and I held it in my hand in my garage where there were also many boxes of his VHS tapes. I held the hard drive and thought: this is really precious but can we use this in the future? If I send VCRs to the archive, we're safe for a while with the tapes, but I worry about future historians accessing any of this material, and even people saving it. That's a challenge for our field going forward.

Susanna: If we think of amateur porn, that's always been doubly the case because usually children don't inherit their parents' amateur productions. Of course this can happen, but it's kind of rare. Personal porn archives are also ephemeral since people curate and cull them, and then they tend to disappear, or be destroyed (Kyrölä and Paasonen 2016). We know quite little about histories of amateur porn in particular, which has to do with that kind of double layer of how fragile it is.

Probably the best archives, historically, are those of the censors since whatever has been censored has usually been caught up in the archive, and usually it's in pretty good shape because people haven't been accessing it. In the Nordics, we do have

access to depository libraries, which makes it easy to study print porn up to the present day: it's all there unless it's been stolen, as it sometimes has been. But certainly vast amounts of stuff have completely, utterly disappeared, even as many older clips have come into circulation on porn video aggregator sites.

Robert Gehl (2009) once wrote an article about YouTube as an archive without a curator and the same applies to porn sites emulating it. What does it mean when there's no metadata, which might be even more the case with xHamster than YouTube? Historical films and video are made easily available, but then they can disappear overnight. And when it comes to contemporary pornography, it's not archived with gusto. Internet Archive doesn't really go for the porn. I'm pretty sure that national heritage initiatives, like the one on archiving the Finnish internet, aren't not inclusive of many things.

When it comes to optically scanning of all the magazines and newspapers that exist in depository libraries, including porn magazines would mean including things that are now illegal, yet weren't in the 1970s, such as underage models and actual children. Since scanning cannot be fully automated, there would also be the issue of who'd be doing it, and under what kind of conditions. So, it's my sense that there may be this effacement of porn from digitized cultural heritage, even in places where it's historically been part of (some) physical archives.

João: Sweden is similar, in that it's being archived horizontally. It's quite wonderful that I can go to the national library and say, yes, I want this gay porn magazine from '83, and then they bring it to me on the trolley the next day. It's quite lovely. Even with the magazine project that I'm working on at the moment, it's a lot easier to find the Swedish sources despite the fact that pornography is a genre known for not being systematically archived elsewhere.

However, it's a lot easier to find formally distributed magazines, magazines with an actual publisher and sold on newsstands, than to find the little zines that different kink communities or porn communities would send their members. I mean, there's one or two, but due to their small print run, fewer people got them and therefore there's a lower chance of them having been kept and ending up in an archive. That's always the challenge.

I imagine what we need now is a set of amateur archivists doing it for digital porn somehow. But there's the problem that community archives don't have the money to do that, and they don't have the staff to do that. I have a friend who archives digital gay porn because he's a geek and has hard drives and hard drives of porn. And every porn video he watches gets saved into a hard drive. But then the question of ensuring future readability arises, and considering that is important. Copyright, that's a whole other thing too.

Angela: Thinking of webcamming, for example, it's very much perishable. Unless you're doing something very bad, it's completely perishable. So historical work will be tricky beyond certain methodologies.

Susanna: Obviously, I'm realizing I may not be the person to talk about the future of porn studies. And I seem to be very much focused on the historical bits today. But I think these

are part of the future of porn studies in order to better understand local developments, governance practices and discourses on sexuality, and how things have played out in different places.

And yet we know quite little even about the Finnish context that's so easy to study. Much hasn't been done beyond our work with Laura Saarenmaa and Mari Pajala which is only a few articles (Pajala and Paasonen 2019; Paasonen and Saarenmaa 2023a, 2023b). It's quite astonishing, really, how people rather choose to study political discourse in the biggest national newspaper instead. I don't understand them!

João: Now that you've mentioned personal porn archives, you got me thinking … We should all do our bit, and those of us who make their own personal porn should strive towards having it in a kind of readable, archival standard digital format. I had never thought about this before. I mean, many gay men I know, these days they all have their own homemade porn videos, right? And where do they go? I mean, there's the cloud, but what's the longevity of the cloud? What happens if your cloud server goes bust? What happens if your hard drives go bust? What will happen to all of those personal homemade porn videos that would add up to an invaluable map of sex in the twenty-first century?

Peter: For starters, we all should preserve our own collections and donate them to archives when it's our turn to pass on. I really believe this. When I worked with Kleinhans' collection, I saw the value of this. We all have treasures that need to be preserved.

Susanna's point about regional studies is a very important one for our field in the future, and I also think hyper-local too. After all, porn is made everywhere. In the last few years I started researching the porn made in Eugene, Oregon, which is the relatively small town I live in here in the United States. You wouldn't think it's a centre of porn production. I uncovered around 20 adult films here in the early 1970s, in this small place with no history of that. I think it's key for scholars in our field to start doing hyper-local historical research like this, especially since so much of this stuff is long gone and can't even be watched now. So, yes, regional and local research.

Susanna: Indeed. Mariah Larsson (2024) just has an article out in *lambda nordica* in a special issue on sexuality across the borders in the Nordics and Baltics. She's done this micro history of the small border town of Hälle, Sweden, a place few have heard about where, according to 1970s journalists, sex hungry Norwegians came across the border for striptease shows and for buying porn. She went up there during the COVID-19 pandemic and, of course, nothing remains, not even the buildings: now the town sells cheap candy instead. So, still, the Norwegians are coming for something sinful across the border, but it's slightly different.

Generally, porn has been much effaced from all kinds of media histories and local histories. In my context, for example, there's a 10-volume reference work on Finnish print media history where none of the porn magazines are mentioned even as they were quite a notable local industry: they just don't qualify as part of history. It obviously matters how historiography is written: not just porn or media historiography, but also beyond that, how we understand porn as part of so-called general developments.

Peter: Mariah's project is a beautiful, perfect example of what I'm talking about with the micro, hyper-local history.

João: And that kind of micro history also speaks to other transnational and global phenomena or networks.

The project I'm running now came out of my encountering *Kumpel* in a queer history archive. *Kumpel* is the filthiest, most hardcore gay porn magazine I've ever seen in German, which came out in the early '70s. Distributed in Germany, it claimed to have been published in Sweden as porn had been decriminalized there. Yet, it eventually transpired that it was being produced in Germany and that the information about the publisher being in Sweden was only a way to get away with publishing porn at a time when it was still illegal in Germany. Soon after I got my current job here in Linköping and I told this story to my head of department, she told me the town where that magazine had been supposedly published is only a short drive from here. It's interesting that this hardcore magazine written in German, that leathermen were buying and reading in Germany, was circulated as if it was published in a very small town in the middle of Sweden.

Were you to look around this region today, you wouldn't be able to tell that anything like *Kumpel* could have emerged out of this very 'civilized' and mild-mannered place. And yet, at one point, it played a significant role – even if purely made-up – in shaping the history of German and European gay fetish and BDSM porn and print culture.

We're basically talking about the past but maybe there's something about the future of the field that also involves a relooking, a looking again with different eyes, to tell stories from the past.

Susanna: Yes, it also just speaks of how much we don't know about porn in the present or in the past, and also of the limitations involved in studying the past. Which then easily leads to us studying things that we have access to. I fully understand why graduate students (and others) who want to do a project on porn will gravitate towards what's manageable. I'm not against that, but I think what we need is more funding and more muscle to do projects together in order to figure out broader developments, rather than doing small-scale work individually. Which, of course, is vital, but remains on a certain scale and scope.

João: Then the question is about who will be funding that, especially given the current political climate. For porn research to be funded to that extent, to that scale, you know, millions will be needed for what would be a big, ambitious research project involving several people. My impression is that it has always been the work of lone scholars or of small groups of people bringing their energy together, often with no or insignificant funding, to put some time into porn research, and I'm unsure if in the current moment funders will be giving money to that kind of project.

Susanna: European Research Council (ERC) – I'm hopeful. I may be naive, but I'm actually hopeful.

Peter: I'm so glad to hear you say that, Susanna. I'm sure Angela can speak to this, too, but I feel like everything is becoming divided now in the United States. We're moving towards two sorts of systems, based regionally. I have friends who work in places where it's

unthinkable they could do this kind of research and get any sort of support, whereas at my institution it's really not that controversial, in the sense that there isn't anyone stopping me or putting pressure on me to stop. We're cruising towards a situation where it's going to get harder and harder if you're in certain parts of the country. Is that your experience, too, Angela?

Angela: Without question, and I think that that's already upon us and been here, right? So, I mean you can't even buy a sex toy in Alabama. I live in New York, which is considered this liberal progressive bastion, and yet, even here there are so many institutional mechanisms that make doing this work so incredibly challenging.

And I think in some ways this has disincentivized junior scholars from getting into this field. I have a lot to say about Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) so if you're doing work, where you're interacting with humans and conducting interviews, focus groups, or talking to people, IRBs make doing this work incredibly challenging.

The issue of funding is incredibly challenging. When I talk to some of my friends across the pond and in other places who talk about, oh, I got funding, there's even governmental funding. In the US, funding sources are so scarce here.

Peter: Oh yes, I've been rejected. I've never gotten a national grant in the US. I've been rejected for large-scale projects. I'm glad you brought up junior scholars because I think we should talk about that. Susanna, early on in this conversation you said this nice phrase about how incestuous the field was in the past and it's true. I have fond memories of when it felt like a very small number of people, and there was a sense of underground community. At the same time, I'm sad because a lot of those people are gone from the field now. We've lost so many people who did incredible work and could not get hired and left academia. It's hard to think about what's been lost in this field because there was no support for those people.

I just want so badly for our field to thrive, so that in the next 10 years we have the support for people coming up to feel like they can really take this work on and not be scared of it or not be too nervous to commit to it. I've heard many stories over the years of advisors who have meetings with grad students and say things like: oh, thank God you don't want to write a whole dissertation on porn. Thank God it's only one chapter. Thank God it's only one essay. We need people who are willing to say: no, the whole thing is on porn because that's what I want to be as a scholar and that's what I want to do, I want to commit to the whole thing.

Susanna: I just have to show you a very impressive linen-bound thesis copy from University of Milan, 'The Obscene Device: Archaeology of Immersive Pornographies' by Roberto Malaspina (2023), who defended it exactly a week ago. And it has a whole thing on posturology, the physical poses and positions involved in the uses of immersive porn since nineteenth-century stereoscopes: from stooped postures to uncomfortable motion sickness of VR porn that he discusses as uncomfortable media.

The work is in philosophy and was funded through an ERC project which, on the whole, is definitely not on porn. I'm very glad since Italy has not always been the easiest environment for porn studies, despite the Gorizia Spring Schools, and it's not always easy for junior scholars. Yet things do happen.

João: I think it is the case both with porn studies and queer studies, that really interesting and exciting thinking is coming out of many places in Europe and South America that are on the fringes or peripheries of academic institutions. This phenomenon can, to some extent, give our field some freshness, new ways of thinking that are not constrained by the disciplinary apparatus. Yet, people should be able to make a living out of their work. Maybe there's something here about those of us who have secure employment and work professionally in the field, what we can do to support the work and careers of younger researchers, to advise them and create different, more capacious pathways and infrastructures that can hold them.

I was thinking about conferences, but I also think about conferences as scary, especially the big US conferences where everyone is there to be the one that stands out. So maybe something else, some kind of structure or platform where people can come together. I think maybe that is not as developed as it could be … I mean the only place I've been that was kind of like that was the porn studies strand of the MAGIS International Film Studies Spring School, in Gorizia, Italy, which was fantastic.

Or that SCMS career advice for young scholars working on porn that happened online recently. … It feels like some people are trying to help researchers coming into the field on how do to make it, how to get a job so you can actually live off the research that you enjoy doing. Maybe there's something there too about the future, right? How do we ensure the future of the field not only as a scholarly enterprise, but also as a material enterprise, especially considering how universities and political environments are becoming so challenging. What spaces can we create that support the youngest among us?

Angela: I was thinking about this, a comment that I was going to make, when we were talking before about gaps in porn studies and moving forward, I'm wondering if you track data on where submissions are coming from. I've been thinking a lot about disciplinary boundaries throughout this conversation. So, who gets funding? Who doesn't?

What I was thinking before was that in the US, if I wanna write about porn as a public health crisis, ohh I can get funding, right? But if I dare wanna say anything about joy or political economy or workers and their rights, there's no funding for that. And so, thinking about some of what Peter was talking about before in relation to junior scholars, a lot of the junior scholars that I work with, their advisors, the people that they work closely with are discouraging them from publishing across interdisciplinary boundaries. For example, you know, spending a lot of my time in sociology, that happens a lot in that discipline, where students are being discouraged from submitting to interdisciplinary journals or even just doing work on porn.

Or being told outright, that one chapter in the dissertation can be about porn and or sex work, but it has to be more broadly about work or some other general, less taboo theme. And so I wonder if you have data on submissions. So, if it shows that you aren't getting submissions from certain disciplinary areas you could strategically find ways to reach out to those folks. Because I think what we're saying is those students, those people, they're there. They might be being discouraged from submitting to a place like *Porn Studies*, or don't know it exists, which we should address, because I think publishing in *Porn Studies* and engaging with all the amazing work in our now thriving subfield is so valuable for their career. To tell them, listen, there are plenty of spaces for this work. It just may not be in your home rigid discipline.

Susanna: Yeah. And also having a journal where they don't need to explain why they're doing this.

Angela: Yes! Where they don't have to do that exhausting legitimacy work.

Peter: That's something I want to talk briefly about, which is the notion of academic legitimacy and how crucial that is for our field, especially now that we're in a little bit of a generational transitional moment where some of our elders, the real founders of the field, are transitioning out of active work, people like Linda Williams and Constance Penley, for example.

It's really critical that academic legitimacy carry on for our field, that we have senior scholars, public intellectuals, monographs, endowed chairs, and grants. Those are really critical. Simultaneously it's equally important that we support contingent faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, junior scholars, graduate students, graduate student employees, and so on. A whole ecosystem must be in place for academic legitimacy to happen. Linda Williams (2014) wrote in the journal's first issue about how we need to water the garden. It's critical.

Susanna: And then there's also the question about moving beyond film studies as a discipline rooted in art studies. There is a kind of legitimacy to working on film, tied up with hierarchies of culture, and the politics are very different when we move beyond cinema to media studies, game studies, or cultural studies.

Clarissa: I just wanted to come in before we end if I may? It has been fascinating listening to all of this, but one of the things that's struck me quite recently is that studies of porn have been emerging in other disciplines in which they've kind of gone back – it's Susanna's temporal fold again! – but the way to be studying porn once again is in terms of effects and in terms of legal issues. For example, in the work around deep fakes especially in the UK, there's a real sense of an institutionalization of porn as problem. And the studies being taken seriously, don't come out of porn studies per se but out of other disciplines with no interest in actually understanding pornography. So last week, I was asked to speak to Baroness Bertin, who's doing the independent review of porn commissioned by the last Tory government, but she's still working on it as we move to a new government.

And she asked me just to elucidate what porn studies is as a discipline. It was an odd conversation, to realize that I'm talking to somebody who spent the last eight months or so investigating porn and she had no understanding that there could be an academic journal that does double-blind peer review of work that actually examines pornography across different dimensions. She's been talking to numerous academics but they have been from disciplines that are so outwith cultural studies, media studies, film studies, etcetera. And she's been talking to people from around the world but most especially those who have investment, financial, religious, moralist, political investment, in seeing the 'end of porn', I don't know what we do about that though.

João: You have to keep on talking to them!

Clarissa: It's always starting at the beginning again though!

Peter: Porn permanently resides in a place where it cannot escape from those questions, always. It's always been there and always will be there. It's a side effect that we have to be there, too, and it shows the constant tenuousness of our field.

Clarissa: There's no real institutional memory. That really speaks to your point that as people transition out of this space, who's coming up to replace them?

João: I think this is also part of this wider context in the UK and also in the US, where there is a growing conservative populist suspicion of universities, especially of humanities and social sciences departments, as hotbeds of, whatever they call it, 'cultural Marxism', socialism, 'gender ideology' (whatever that is), postcolonial theory, critical race theory … It's all the same, and it's all part of the same cabal. It makes it a lot harder to try to put anything across that will challenge that baseline narrative that our disciplines are just sucking money from funders to put it towards some kind of radical left ideology, at least that's the discourse in in the UK. We're always fighting the same kind of fight.

Feona: We need to close now, but it has been fascinating to reflect on the ongoing challenges and necessary steps we'll need for future growth and sustainability of porn studies. And so encouraging Susanna to hear you describe the journal as offering a space where scholars don't need to justify their research focus!

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