

“But What About Feminist Porn?”: Examining the Work of Tristan Taormino

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Abstract

This article examines the work of Tristan Taormino, a prominent self-described feminist pornographer, in order to illustrate themes and commitments common among those who produce, perform in, and/or support feminist pornography. I argue that her work is burdened by thin and limited conceptions of feminism, authenticity, and sexual ethics, as well as by the profit-based exigencies of producing “feminist porn” within the mainstream pornography industry. I conclude that, if indeed feminist pornography is possible, Taormino’s work falls far short of the mark. Public Health Significance Statement: This study suggests that Taormino’s pornographic films are unlikely to have salutary effects on the sexual and relational lives of their consumers.

Keywords

feminism, pornography, feminist pornography, Taormino

For over two decades now, I have taught, written, and spoken publicly about pornography from a feminist perspective. In the 1990s, the most common critical questions I received involved censorship and the law. In recent years, the focus has changed: when there are critical questions, they most often concern feminist pornography. What about it? Does it exist? Could it exist? Do I, or would I, object to it? What is it like, or what could it be like?

I do not find the “what-if” and “could-there-be” questions particularly illuminating, nor am I skilled at prognosticating what media forms might exist in possible postpatriarchal futures. Furthermore, as in discussions of pornography generally, sometimes people are motivated to defend “feminist pornography” in the abstract while knowing little to nothing about the actual material in question. Thus, it seems more fruitful to bring the discussion down to cases: that is, to investigate what some of those who claim to be making feminist pornography are actually making, and what they are saying about what they are making. People can then judge for themselves whether that material reflects a sexual ethic, and a conception of feminism, that they wish to endorse.

Case Study: Tristan Taormino

This article focuses on one self-described feminist pornographer who looms large in the contemporary “sex-positive” and “sex radical” firmament. Tristan Taormino first came to prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s as, among other

things, editor of the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* and a sex columnist for the *Village Voice*. In 1999, she collaborated with mainstream pornographer John Stagliano and fetish porn producer Ernest Greene on *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, a porn film based on her book of the same title. In more recent years, Taormino’s porn productions have included the *Chemistry* series, the *Rough Sex* series, and *Tristan Taormino’s Expert Guides* to various sexual acts.

Author, speaker, educator, editor, TV host, filmmaker, and more: when it comes to the various self-styled sex-positive movements, venues, and endeavors of roughly the last twenty years, Taormino has done it all, and she has been at the center of much of it. The variety and reach of Taormino’s work illustrates that, as Comella (2013) observes, “Feminist pornography is not a series of stand-alone texts that exist outside of a much wider cultural context—and history—of sex-positive feminist cultural production and commerce” (p. 91).

In addition to being prominent, Taormino is intelligent, reflective, and articulate about the choices she has made and about the politics and assumptions underlying those choices. Furthermore, her body of work exemplifies themes and

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commitments that are largely consistent among those who produce, perform in, and/or support feminist pornography.

My discussion is based partly on Taormino's published writings and interviews as well as on an admittedly small selection of her films—one full-length and several extended clips. While I see no reason to believe that the selections I viewed are unrepresentative of her film work as a whole, readers should take into account that my critique is based on a limited sampling of that work.

As will quickly become evident, Taormino's feminist politics are different from my own, and my take on her work is a critical one. My aim is not to write a hit piece, however, but rather to articulate clearly the political and ethical worldview that underlies Taormino's body of work—thus, again, enabling more informed discussions of feminist pornography and related issues.

"An Industry Within an Industry"

Feminist critics of pornography frequently emphasize that, whatever else it may be, contemporary pornography is above all an industry within a capitalist marketplace. As Jensen (2007) points out, "the DVDs and internet sites to which men are masturbating are not being made by struggling artists who work in lonely garrets, tirelessly working to help us understand the mysteries of sexuality" (p. 79). Even once we understand that mainstream pornography is driven by profit, we may tend to assume that *feminist* pornography emerges from utopian enclaves, where people produce exactly what they want to produce based on their own unique, creative, and egalitarian visions of sex.

Of course, no such enclaves exist, or if they do, then few people will ever see whatever erotic materials are created therein. As Taormino, Parreñas-Shimuzu, Penley, and Miller-Young (2013) write in their introduction to *The Feminist Porn Book*,

feminist porn is not only an emergent social movement and an alternative cultural production: it is a genre of media made for profit. Part of a multibillion dollar business in adult entertainment media, feminist porn is an industry within an industry. (pp. 15–16)

In a 2014 interview, Taormino comments further that

In the United States there is not necessarily a clear, discrete division between "feminist/queer/indie porn" and "mainstream porn" I situate my own work in both worlds: I make feminist pornography that is funded and distributed by mainstream companies and features primarily mainstream performers. (Voss, 2014, p. 204)

In fact, perhaps more than any other figure, Taormino has occupied and helped to shape both mainstream and alternative spaces within the sex industry—as evidenced by, among other things, her having repeatedly won both Adult Video News awards and Feminist Porn awards.

Taormino is well aware of the trade-offs attendant on working with mainstream porn companies and reaching mainstream audiences. As she puts it in the 2003 documentary *Hot and Bothered*, "Funding is always an issue people always ask why isn't there more feminist porn, why there isn't more lesbian porn, and the truth is, you need money" (Goldberg, 2003). She continues,

I basically had two different ways to go. I could try the feminist way, which is that you beg, borrow, and steal, you do it on a shoestring, you ask all your friends to do stuff for free, and then you try to distribute it yourself. Or, I could go directly to the man and sell out, and go to a mainstream adult company, where I would have to compromise some of my, like, artistic integrity. (Goldberg, 2003)

Indeed, one can only be so critical of mainstream porn if that is the venue within which one works and within which one hopes to maintain friendly ties and funding sources. Similarly, one can only diverge so far from the tropes of mainstream porn while still appealing to any reasonable subset of its consumer base.

Like all pornography, and indeed all media, feminist pornography can be analyzed in terms of its production, its content, and its consumption (Jensen, 2007); and when media is produced and sold within a capitalist marketplace, such analysis must keep a clear eye on how each dimension is shaped by the imperatives of profit.

Production: From Consent to Authenticity

Taormino's most extensive discussion of what qualifies some pornography, including her own, as feminist involves the dimension of production—in particular, how she hires, treats, and works with performers. Her approach to making porn production "safe, professional, political, empowering, and fun" (Taormino, 2013, p. 264) involves a number of practices that diverge from industry standards—from performers setting their own pay rates and choosing their own sexual partners, to providing a clean and safe work space with healthy snacks and performers' preferred drinks and hygiene products. In addition, her decision in 2013 (virtually alone among mainstream pornographers) to require condom use on her sets manifested a level of human decency and concern for performers' safety (Cohen, 2013).

Perhaps most central to Taormino's own definition of feminist porn production, however, is the role of collaboration between director and performers. In "Calling the Shots: Feminist Porn in Theory and Practice," she writes:

Before we step foot on set, I have conversations with my performers, get to know them, ask them questions about their sexual likes and dislikes, favorite activities and toys, and what helps them have a really great work experience. I design their scenes around this information. (Taormino, 2013, p. 260)

Taormino's approach thus implicitly challenges one common refrain of feminists who oppose both pornography and prostitution: that these industries by their nature require people, primarily women, to have *unwanted sex*—sex that at best bores them and at worst repels and traumatizes them—out of economic need (Moran, 2013; Tyler, 2015). Her ideal is that, on her film sets, people are having sex that they *do* want to have in the very ways that they want to have it. Discussing her *Chemistry* series, she writes:

I'm interested in allowing the action to unfold organically (as organically as it can with lights, cameras, and people standing around you) and for people to move and fuck in ways they want to, for however long they want to . . . So much of porn asks performers to act out someone else's fantasy or do what someone else thinks looks sexy: what if they were given the opportunity to do their own thing? (Taormino, 2013, p. 259)

Thus, Taormino's performers choose their sexual activities and partners, she says, "all based on what feels good to them, all based on their actual sexuality, not a fabricated script" (p. 261). In this way, she moves beyond the view commonly articulated by defenders not only of feminist porn but of porn generally: that everything is fine so long as everyone involved is freely consenting. To her credit, she sees that, for porn as for sex generally, mere consent is a low threshold.

For Taormino, then, the defining feature of ethical and feminist porn production is not consent but *authenticity*. She traces this emphasis back to her experiences directing explicit photo shoots for *On Our Backs*, noting that "what readers responded to most was the level of authentic desire and connection between the people. If I could capture that in a moving image, it could be even more palpable and powerful" (Taormino, 2013, p. 258). Her emphasis on authenticity is also evident in her practice of including extended performer interviews in her films. Unlike the brief and formulaic interviews found in most mainstream porn, she says, her interviews allow performers to speak more genuinely and at greater length about their feelings, desires, and experiences, both within and outside the industry, thus both giving them an authentic voice and humanizing them for the viewer.

Authenticity: Constraints and Complications

Since authenticity figures so prominently in Taormino's claim to be creating feminist pornography, it is worth examining this concept and the realities behind it in some depth.

There are many possible conceptions of authenticity when it comes to people's desires and choices (sexual or otherwise).¹ Taormino's is an exceptionally thin one: when she calls a performer's desire or choice "authentic," she means only that this is something the person sincerely wants to do or from which she or he derives real (rather than faked) pleasure. As I will show, however, even given this minimal conception of authenticity, her claims about its role in her productions are open to question. While

Taormino's pursuit of authenticity in her filmmaking is neither meaningless nor trivial, it is considerably more complicated than she makes it out to be.

At the very least, we should note the built-in limitations on authenticity in the context of pornography production. For example, Taormino (2013) describes as follows the production of her *Chemistry* series:

I take a group of porn stars to a house for thirty-six hours. There is no script and no schedule and everything is filmed. They decide who they have sex with, when, where, and what they do.

I tell the performers before we begin shooting: *forget everything you know about porn.* (p. 258)

That is, she explains, the performers are to forget all the formulas and tropes that define mainstream porn: two minutes of this position, three minutes of that, ending with the "money shot" (of male ejaculation). Rather, the performers should do what *they* like to do sexually: all and only those sex acts that they authentically wish to perform, in the ways they wish to perform them.

Needless to say, not having sex at all during this rollicking weekend, or having sex only once or twice, is not among the options—at least if one wants to be paid much or hired again. And having sex in ways that are not camera friendly, or that for any reason cannot reasonably be expected to appeal to viewers, is similarly not on the agenda. It is unsurprising, then, that in the scene I viewed from *Chemistry, Vol. 1*—in which two inter-racial male/female couples have sex in various positions, with the aid of various sex toys—there are no positions that are not highly visible to the camera. The scene ends in an entirely standard way, with a man ejaculating into a woman's face while she intones "oh yes, give me that cum" (Taormino & Taormino, 2006).

In short, it is impossible to participate in the production of a commercially viable porn film while "forgetting everything you know about porn." Perhaps a more realistic instruction to performers would be to forget as much as you can about porn, consistent with getting paid, maintaining your reputation and marketability in the industry, and ensuring enough viewers for this film to make it commercially viable.

In addition to the constraints on authenticity that are built into pornography production per se, recent developments in the industry impose further such constraints. As Taormino observed in a 2014 interview,

Ten years ago, I had more time and more money to make a movie than I do today. Budgets have decreased, yet the demand for new content remains high, so companies want filmmakers to create a unique product with fewer resources. (Voss, 2014, p. 203)

She does not explain how these market conditions affect her own work, including her often-mentioned practice of allowing performers to set their own pay rates. (Again, built-in limitations should be noted: surely a performer who demands pay significantly higher than standard market rates is less likely to be hired, or hired again.) Taormino notes further that, unlike in decades past,

today the majority of performers have agents Agencies keep track of performers, make sure they arrive to set on time and prepared, and if someone is a no-show they have a pool of possible replacements. As in the mainstream entertainment industry, porn agents run the gamut from professional to unscrupulous. (Voss, 2014, p. 203)

The prevalence of agents in the porn industry is indeed important to consider, particularly the constraints it imposes on performers' choosing to do all and only those sex acts that they authentically desire to do.

Agents make money—again, as in the mainstream entertainment industry—by taking a percentage of performers' earnings. They thus have a financial interest in performers' accepting as many jobs as possible and having as few limits as possible on what sex acts they will perform and with whom. In particular, they benefit financially from performers' willingness to perform what are widely considered more unpleasant, dangerous, and/or degrading acts, since those acts typically pay more.² Even setting aside the financial interests of agents, these market dynamics clearly affect performers' choices. As porn performer Carter Cruise explains,

I know girls who only do vanilla boy-girl scenes.... If you're only doing those scenes though, you limit your audience and you don't make as much money. If you do things like anal, kinks, taboos, fetishes, girl-girl, boy-girl, you reach a much larger audience and you make a lot more money. (Moneybags, 2014)

As Cruise further explains, not all agencies even allow their performers to limit the jobs they will take:

The agency that I'm with only represents 25 girls at a time, so they require all their girls to do everything.... we aren't allowed to have no-lists. I can't say I don't want to work with a guy because I don't like him. (Moneybags, 2014)

Taormino says little about how she responds to this complex set of realities in her own work. How does she take account of the fact that her performers' putatively authentic choices are constrained not only by their own financial interests but often by those of their agents as well? Would her ethical stance allow her to employ a performer who, in turn, works with an agency like the one Cruise describes? Does she pay performers more for engaging in more painful, risky, and/or degrading sex acts? If not, how would she explain this divergence from industry standards? If, on the other hand, she does pay more for these acts, then it's not clear why: after all, as she repeatedly assures us, her performers engage in those acts only if—and only because—they truly want to do them and are sexually gratified by doing them. So why would they expect, or deserve, to be paid more for them?³ The economic realities underlying performers' choices, then, are considerably murkier than Taormino's cheerful celebration of authenticity suggests.

The Persistence of Trauma

Porn performer Sinnamon Love has observed that, when it comes to porn production, “female directors have an advantage.” She explains:

Directors like Joanna Angel, Belladonna, Julie Simone, and Chanta Rose ... manage to produce beautiful images of women but still get these women to push their limits in intense scenes. Perhaps some women feel more comfortable with a woman behind the camera asking them to do things that might be deemed degrading if asked by a male director. (Love, 2013, pp. 99–100)

The dynamic Love describes here may be exacerbated when the director is not only a woman but a self-described feminist who emphasizes making her sets ethical, fun, and so on. How could anything upsetting or harmful happen here, where we're all safe and professional and here to get empowered?

As I will detail later, at least one performer in Taormino's films appears, in an accompanying interview, to be describing a traumatic reaction. It is also instructive to look at Taormino's comments about her first and only experience performing in her own films. Her first film, 1999's *Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, culminated in an anal gangbang performed on Taormino herself. While some of her later descriptions of this experience have been glowing, in a 2000 interview, she gave a different impression. After explaining that, because the action was supposed to take place in one day, she had to wear the same outfit every day of filming, she goes on to say that the shirt she wore in the film “was a favorite of mine, which now I can't bear to wear.” Asked what she would do to unwind after a day of shooting, she responded:

I don't drink or do drugs Usually we'd go to dinner and then we'd watch TV and go to sleep. I'd also take long walks with my dog ... For me my dogs are very grounding and simple in their unconditional love for me. I'd come home to my dog with the bug eyes and feel comforted. (Hernandez-Rosenblatt, 2000)

While it is reassuring that Taormino did not feel the need to drink or do drugs to cope with her experience, her immediate reference to these measures suggests that they are not uncommon among porn performers. Her reference to feeling “comforted” by the loving presence of her dog also suggests that her experience of being anally penetrated by ten people on film was not as fun or empowering as some of her later comments would suggest. Perhaps it is not surprising that she has since confined her own participation in pornography to directing and producing, rather than performing.

Content: Is Anything Off-Limits?

Beyond issues of production, Taormino clearly intends for the content of her films to differ in important ways from mainstream (nonfeminist) pornography. In fact, she cites disturbing developments in mainstream gonzo pornography as a key

impetus for her decision to make porn production a central element of her work. Referring to the mid-2000s, she writes:

The trend in gonzo was the more extreme, the better . . . It was as degrading and offensive as any antiporn feminist's worst nightmare. The scenes were not about exploring dominance and submission, being rough, or pushing the envelope. The spirit of some seemed downright hostile. Taormino, (Taormino, 2013, p. 257)

She does not explain the differences between porn being “hostile”—or, as she puts it elsewhere, “joyless and mean” (Taormino, 2002, p. 134)—and its “exploring dominance and submission, being rough, or pushing the envelope.”⁴

Taormino’s films, however, include many of the same acts common in (other) mainstream pornography, such as gagging, choking, slapping, and misogynist name-calling.⁵ When it comes to content, the similarities between her films and the rest of mainstream pornography are readily apparent; the question is, what are the differences?

Compared to mainstream gonzo, Taormino’s films include marginally less robotic fucking and more emphasis on activities such as cunnilingus and vibrator use. There is some kissing and even some laughing here and there—neither of which is common in mainstream porn (unless the laughter is at women’s expense). The core of Taormino’s approach to pornography’s content, however, is captured in the continuation of the quote above. Having decried the hostile nature of many mainstream gonzo films, she goes on to observe that such films

lacked a fundamental component: female pleasure. I mean, if you’re going to go to the trouble of calling a woman a slut and smacking her while you fuck her, there damn well better be an awesome orgasm in it for her. If she’s not having a great time, what’s the point? (Taormino, 2013, p. 257)

Aside from the flippant attitude it displays toward misogynist epithets and violence, this quote exemplifies a tenet basic to the ideology of pro-porn feminism: that it is fine to portray dominance, submission, pain, and hierarchy as sexually exciting, so long as women are shown consenting to them and even enjoying them. As Taormino explained in *Cosmopolitan*,

Images of dominance and submission are not anti-feminist in and of themselves, but one of the reasons feminists critique them is because consent is not always explicit and because of the repetition of men dominating women . . . Feminist pornographers don’t want to do away with sexual power dynamics; many of us want to explore them in an explicitly consensual and more diverse, nuanced, non-stereotypical way. (Breslaw, 2013)

In fact, according to this view, it is rebellious and liberatory for women to claim traditionally male roles and prerogatives in sex. Taormino (2002) bemoans the fact that “women are still not seen as sexual aggressors, predators, or consumers” (p. xiv); feminist porn aims, among other things, to fill this representational gap. As we will shortly see, however, depicting women in submissive and subordinated sexual roles is also

seen as liberatory and feminist—provided, of course, that it is all consensual and authentic.

Taormino (2013) explains that she “place[s] so much emphasis on the process of making porn because it’s difficult to designate what a feminist porn *image* looks like” (p. 263). It is, indeed: if celebratory eroticized depictions of female pain, abject submission, and even violence against women need not disqualify something as feminist pornography, what exactly is left?

Representation and Personnel

One often-cited difference between feminist pornography and other pornography involves *who* is seen performing: as Taormino and her coeditors (2013) explain, feminist pornography emphasizes “the inclusion of underrepresented identities and practices” (p. 15). More specifically, Taormino (2013) says, feminist pornography is “committed to depicting diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class, body size, ability, and age” (p. 262). She always includes performers of color in her own films, and she seeks to increase the visibility in porn of trans and genderqueer performers. This emphasis on diverse personnel unites many advocates and creators of queer, indie, and otherwise alternative porn as well as of self-described feminist porn.

Without dismissing the value of diverse representation, it is worth noting that marketplace constraints are once again germane. Take, for example, diversity in women’s body size: having admittedly viewed only a small subset of Taormino’s films, I would be surprised if any women appear in them who weigh over two hundred pounds. While there are niche and fetish markets for porn featuring such women, Taormino aims to appeal to mainstream audiences, and that means the women’s appearances (and the men’s too, for that matter) can be “diverse” only within fairly narrow parameters. It is thus not surprising that most of the women performers in Taormino’s films also sport entirely hairless bodies (including pubic areas); like porn depicting fat women, porn displaying female pubic hair constitutes a niche/fetish genre.

Because both commercial and ideological considerations prohibit placing many (if any) constraints on content, it makes sense that diversity of personnel figures so prominently in explanations of what makes “feminist porn” feminist. It is not so much that different things are being done in feminist porn, but rather that more different kinds of people are shown doing them.

“What a Feminist Porn Image Looks Like”: Three Illustrations

We can best discern Taormino’s beliefs about what counts as feminist content in pornography by looking at what she includes in her own films. Consider, for instance, the following three examples.

Facials. In “Calling the Shots,” Taormino describes the development of her perspective on the ever-popular “facial” (in which one or more men ejaculate on a woman’s face). In her first film, although she succumbed to her male mentor’s expectation that each scene end with the standard external cum shot, she insisted on no facials: “*It’s a porn trope! It’s degrading! Women don’t enjoy it!*” (Taormino, 2013, p. 256, italics in original). She goes on to explain, however, that her perspective on facial cum shots has evolved in the intervening years: “I believe viewers appreciate consent, context, chemistry, and performer agency more than the presence or absence of a specific act” (Taormino, 2013, p. 263). Taormino’s evolving principles may well have coincided with the increasingly apparent demands of her consumer base: again, when making mainstream porn, you make what sells in a mainstream market. Taormino’s ambivalence about her choices in this regard is reflected when she goes on to say:

I’m conscious of the dangers of repetition of a specific act like a facial cum shot and what it could signify, specifically that men’s orgasms represent the apex of a scene . . . and women’s bodies are things to be used, controlled, and marked like territory. Although I am trying to make a different kind of porn, once I put it out in the world, I can’t control how it’s received. (2013, p. 263)

While it is true that she cannot control how a facial cum shot is received or interpreted by viewers, she can and does predict quite accurately how it *will* be (mostly) received. The quote makes clear that she has decided to include these images in her films, knowing full well what they mean in a broader cultural context and why they are rewarding for the average porn consumer.

Racial Language. Taormino (2013) criticizes the “inequality, stereotypes, and racist depictions” common in mainstream porn, where, she says, “race is exoticized, fetishized, and commodified in very particular ways” (p. 261). Noting the industry’s tendency to cast performers of color either not at all or only in ethnically specific and often overtly racist films, she touts her own divergence from this pattern:

I’m committed to combatting stereotypical portrayals on every level: I refuse to use race-specific, and often demeaning, language on box covers and in marketing materials. (Taormino, 2013, p. 262)

It is rare to see Taormino articulate such a firm limit on content. As it turns out, however, her specification “on box covers or in marketing materials” is significant, as even my limited viewing of her films yielded two instances of race-specific language.

In a scene from *Chemistry, Vol. 1* portraying two interracial couples, an off-camera voice asks a female performer, “What do you see?” The performer responds, “I see a pink pussy . . . it looks so tight, like it’s squeezing your black cock” (Taormino & Taormino, 2006). While this racialized reference to the

black penis was presumably not scripted, Taormino could have edited it out. She chose to keep it in.

The second racial reference occurs in *Rough Sex 3*. In an interview prior to her scene, while discussing her feelings about being asked to dominate star Adrianna Nicole, African American performer Jada Fire relates a prior experience of racist abuse on a porn set:

You can dominate a woman but you don’t have to degrade her. Because I’ve been called a black piece of shit before. [Off-camera female voice, presumably Taormino: In a scene?] Yeah. [By a woman?] Yeah. She fucked me up like mentally, with the stuff that she said. . . . I know the boundaries, how far to go. (Taormino & Taormino, 2010)

In the ensuing scene, Jada Fire wears a standard dominatrix outfit in order to boss around, push, shove, and humiliate Adrianna Nicole. At one point, she dons an impressively large black strap-on dildo and orders Nicole, “you suck this fucking black dick . . . let’s see you fucking choke on this.”

Thus, it is indeed just in marketing materials that Taormino eschews “race-specific and often demeaning language.” Again, while the racial references are not Taormino’s own words, it is her call whether to include them. She could, if she chose, instruct her performers never to employ such terms. She has made her decision, not only with respect to racialized language but also with respect to the misogynist epithets—such as “bitch,” “whore,” and “slut”—that pervade both her films and her writings.

Cash. The second scene of *Rough Sex 3*, entitled “Cash,” features Adrianna Nicole as a woman in prostitution and Ramon Nomar as a man buying sexual access to her. In the interviews preceding the scene, each performer offers his or her perspective on the nature and/or appeal of prostitution. Nomar explains:

[It’s] about the power . . . this afternoon is gonna be like I say, and you cannot say anything. You get the money, and—shh—zip. [mimes ‘zipping lip,’ laughs] It’s simple . . . it’s about the person who wants to dominate the other. (Taormino & Taormino, 2010)

Nicole then observes:

When you walk into a scenario like that, you kind of don’t know what you’re gonna get, and you feel like you have to put up a front, and be on your game There is always a danger element to it. I mean you really don’t know, walking in, what you’re gonna get. (Taormino & Taormino, 2010)

Thus, no comforting myths are rehearsed here about prostitution as empowering or liberating for women. Rather, between them, Nomar and Nicole make it abundantly clear that, in their minds, prostitution is about men’s control and women’s submission, men’s speech and women’s silence, men’s sexual imperatives and women’s fear of those imperatives.

These performers' comments strikingly parallel the insights of some women who have exited prostitution. For example, in her memoir *Paid For*, Moran (2013) observes of her experience in so-called high-class prostitution that "the attitude was clear: 'I have paid you two hundred pounds—therefore I will do whatever I feel like doing to you, and you will keep your mouth shut about it'" (p. 91). Regarding uncertainty and fear, Moran (2013) sums it up as follows: "you don't know who or what you're dealing with until the door has closed behind you, and by the time the door has closed behind you, it's too late" (p. 93).

The scene itself is mostly predictable, including plenty of aggression, both verbal and physical. "What do you think I pay you for?" Ramon demands of Adrianna at one point. "You think I can do this with my fucking wife, hmm? You think she will allow me to do this? . . . You are my whore now, you're my fucking whore, that's why you take it like this" (Taormino & Taormino, 2010). Later on, he instructs her: "Don't move from there, open your fucking mouth . . . there you go," as the scene ends with—what else?—a facial cum shot. Thus, beyond what the performers have already articulated, the scene conveys at least the following messages: that men demand sexual acts, and forms of sexual submission, from women in prostitution that they cannot get other women to perform to their satisfaction; and that the resulting sexual encounter is sexually exciting not only for the male buyer but for the prostituted woman herself.

Before leaving this scene, let me draw one further connection, this time regarding the prominent role of strangulation therein.⁶ Less than five minutes into the scene, Ramon strangles Adrianna, and in among all the slapping, bossing, pushing, arm twisting, head yanking, gagging, and more that ensues, strangling is unquestionably the main attraction.

Laughon, Renker, Glass, and Parker (2008), reviewing a range of studies, found that between 34% and 68% of women experiencing intimate partner violence reported strangulation (p. 504). Joshi, Thomas, and Sorenson (2012), who conducted a series of focus groups and interviews at a domestic violence shelter, found that "all of the participants had been strangled and, among them, almost all were strangled multiple times. The loss of consciousness was common" (p. 798). Furthermore, abusers who strangle their victims are especially dangerous, as Laughon et al. (2008) observe:

In addition to the direct health consequences, a partner's use of nonlethal strangulation may indicate increased risk of later lethal violence . . . women who experienced nonlethal strangulation were at increased risk for attempted and completed homicide when controlling for other demographic risk factors. (p. 504)

To sum up, then, a great many abusive men strangle their female victims, causing both physical damage and psychological trauma, and murderous abusers are more likely than nonmurderous abusers to have strangled their victims in the past.

What shall we make of "Cash," in light of this information? Nothing at all, some might say: of course, it is terrible that some women get strangled when they don't want to be strangled, but this woman—Nicole and/or the character she portrays—does want to be strangled because she finds it sexually exciting. And some other women (and perhaps men) do too. Furthermore, Taormino even includes, in a DVD featurtte, a tutorial on how to strangle your partner *safely* during sex. So what is the problem?

The question I mean to raise here is not whether viewers may be caused, or even encouraged, to strangle women by viewing this material. Rather, my concern is with the ethics of representing a key method of misogynist torture and terror as a sex game. Perspectives on this matter clearly vary and reveal much about the politics and priorities of those whose perspectives they are.

Before leaving the "Cash" scene, one final note is in order. In a "behind the scenes" section following the main scene, some seemingly spontaneous sex acts occur (e.g., additional instances of Nomar ejaculating on Nicole). In a subsequent interview, Nicole says that after this performance, she did not leave the set for two or three hours, as she felt "really fucked up," as if she shouldn't be on the road: "I needed to get back to reality a little bit . . . all that was like a big extended scene, and that's why I didn't feel ready to get in my car" (Taormino & Taormino, 2010). We cannot know for sure to what extent the spontaneity here was merely apparent. But to this observer, it seemed that this sequence of events—following, as it did, an already violent scene—took Nicole by surprise, and that as a result, she experienced traumatic dissociation from which it took her several hours to recover.⁷

This Won't be Pretty: Framing the Content

The content of Taormino's films, then, might surprise anyone who expects feminist pornography to represent egalitarian sex or even to eschew misogynist epithets and violent acts against women. It is thus important for Taormino and other creators and defenders of feminist porn to find ways of framing its apparently not-so-feminist content as progressive and liberatory. At least the following three ways of doing so are common in these discussions.

First, ridicule any ethical concerns or constraints as naive and pollyannaish about the nature of sex. As Taormino and her coeditors (2013) put it,

sex-positive feminist porn does not mean that sex is always a ribbon-tied box of happiness and joy . . . Feminist porn explores sexual ideas and acts that may be fraught, confounding, and deeply disturbing to some, and liberating and empowering to others. (p. 15)

Feminist porn, they explain, represents "the power of sexuality in all its unruliness . . . that unruliness may involve producing images that seem oppressive, degrading, or violent" (Taormino et al., 2013, p. 15). This framing is aided by the claim that power hierarchy is an inevitable component

of all sexuality. As Dodson (2013) puts it in the same volume, “Gradually I began to understand that all forms of sex were an exchange of power, whether it was conscious or unconscious” (p. 26). On this view, aspiring to egalitarian sexuality—or expecting representations of such sexuality from self-described feminists—simply reveals one’s failure to understand sex itself.

Second, emphasize the importance of accepting and celebrating all forms of sexuality, as a way of resisting puritanical and oppressively judgmental sexual attitudes. Taormino explains in the 2003 documentary *Hot and Bothered* that “feminism taught me all body parts, all erogenous zones, all sex acts, all fantasies were fair game” (Goldberg, 2003). “We need to represent sex in positive ways,” she urges, “to counteract all the shame, guilt, and judgment that our society heaps on sex” (Blue, 2011).

Third, suggest that portrayals of inequalitarian and/or violent sex can constitute a bold blow against sexist stereotyping. As Taormino (2013) puts it,

The dominant view within the industry is that couples and women want softer, gentler porn. This notion both reflects and reinforces stereotypes about female sexuality: we want romance and flowers and pretty lighting and nothing too hard. And that’s true for some women, but *not all of us*. (p. 258)

On this view, one way to validate female sexuality and rebel against sexist constraints is by showing that women can (really, authentically) like it just as aggressive and nasty as men do and to see to it that women—both performers and viewers—get what they authentically want. Taormino’s emphasis on the stereotype that women only like gentle, romantic sex enables her to cast her own approach as rebellious and groundbreaking—as in the promotional copy for *Rough Sex*, according to which the series “dares to challenge conventional wisdom about the fantasy lives of women” (“Tristan’s Films,” n.d.). In fact her work reinforces a much older and more damaging stereotype: that deep down, women want to be sexually used, objectified, and dominated.

Consumption: “Guilt-Free” Porn Use

Those who promote feminist and other “alternative” pornography frequently make connections between the ethics of production and those of consumption. For example, Vasquez (2012) notes that in “ethical” pornography, “everything is safe and consent is part of the narrative, which enables viewers to watch whatever plays out guilt-free” (p. 33). Men as well as women are encouraged to accept their own porn preferences, whatever those may be: as Taormino and her coeditors (2013) put it, feminist pornography “acknowledges multiple female (and other) viewers with many different preferences” (p. 10). Indeed, part of the point of porn generally, including feminist porn, is to reassure consumers that their sexual desires, preferences, and fantasies are perfectly fine and shared by others

(Whisnant, 2010): as Taormino (2005) observes, “[it] validates viewers when they see themselves or a part of their sexuality represented” (p. 95).

Most feminists agree that it is important to challenge conservative sexual restrictions and judgments and to affirm and enjoy sexuality in ways that do not harm oneself or others. However, many feminists also encourage critical reflection on sexual desire—including one’s own—and the cultural forces that shape and direct it. In fact, it may be that, as Clarke (2004) suggests, “this question of the legitimacy of desires, and whether the fulfillment of desire is the same thing as ‘freedom,’ is at the heart of a feminist critique of pornography and prostitution” (p. 188). Given the content of Taormino’s films, evidently she finds unproblematic the desire of her male and female viewers to masturbate to films of women being strangled, slapped, gagged, called bitches and whores, and more.

It is worth reflecting, in this connection, on the message sent to viewers by Taormino’s relentless focus on authenticity. For instance, a description of her *Rough Sex* series reads, in part, as follows:

the scenes are based entirely on the real fantasies of female performers, which run the gamut from dominance to submission . . . Through dramatic roleplaying, each woman shares her most intimate desires, tests her own boundaries, and rides the seductive line between pleasure and pain. (“Tristan’s Films”, n.d.)

While other films in the series may explore male submission, all scenes in *Rough Sex 3* involve the submission of Adrianna Nicole and her often-violent domination by female and male co-performers. The message, repeatedly reinforced in performer interviews, is that the scenes represent Nicole’s *true* desires and fantasies and that everything has been designed and choreographed to give her exactly what she wants. The film’s subtitle, *Adrianna’s Dangerous Mind*, reassures the consumer that—notwithstanding one’s arousal to scenes of violence against a woman—it is *her* mind that is “dangerous”, not one’s own.

Thus, the tacit deal that most pornography strikes with the viewer—“she’ll fake orgasm, we’ll tell you the story that she loves it, wink-wink, and you believe what you want”—is off here. The viewer is told in no uncertain terms, including by the performer herself, that what the film depicts really *is* what she wants and craves. Whether this is true is not, for the moment, the point. The point is that the films take on a certain kind of ideological power that trades precisely on their claim to represent women’s *authentic* desires—and that, depending on what those desires are, that ideological power is far from benign or feminist.

“Run Out and Do It”: Feminist Porn as Sex Education

Many defenders of porn, feminist and otherwise, urge attention to the distinction between fantasy and reality, pointing out that

viewing some act on screen does not necessarily mean one even wants to do it, let alone that one actually will. Taormino (2014), by contrast, has stated repeatedly that she means for her films to inspire viewers to, as she puts it, “run out and do it” (p. 256). Feminist porn, she observes, “gives [women and men] information and ideas about sex. It teaches. It inspires fantasy and adventure . . . ” (Taormino, 2005, p. 95). Because her writings, workshops, and films depict fully consensual and mutually rewarding sex acts, presumably, this will all be to the good.

As I will further elaborate in the next section, what viewers are inspired by Taormino’s work to run out and do may be a considerably more mixed bag. A hint can be found in one of Taormino’s first major media interviews, with misogynist “shock jock” Howard Stern on his radio show in 1997. Taormino chose to debut her book *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* on Stern’s show, where it no doubt found a receptive audience. A telling moment occurs during a discussion of digital anal penetration:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Stern: | And what if she says, “Ow, that hurts, I don’t want it, I don’t like that. Get your fingers out of there.” That means, go ahead anyway? <i>[Taormino laughs]</i> |
| Robin Quivers: | No, that means you’re going too fast. |
| Taormino: | That means you’re going too fast, or you’re not using enough lube, or she’s having anxiety and she’s tensing up (Stern, 1997). |

Coming from a feminist who claims to promote consent above all, this reply is shocking. The only defensible response would be that it means you should, in fact, immediately “get your fingers out of there.” Taormino’s reply, intimating that the woman does not know what she wants or will ultimately like, so the man should keep trying in a different way, replicates rape myths and promotes the sexual violation of women.

[Un]marked by a Threat: Banishing Social Context

In their introduction to *The Feminist Porn Book*, Taormino and her coeditors (2013) observe that the writings therein “[defy] other feminist conceptions of sexuality on screen as forever marked by a threat. That threat is the specter of violence against women, which is the primary way that pornography has come to be seen” (p. 13). Presumably, then, they believe it is both possible and desirable to produce sexual representations that are wholly *unmarked* by the threat (and pervasive reality) of sexual violence and exploitation. On the contrary, however, Taormino’s own body of work is deeply marked by that threat, in ways that—though she determinedly ignores them—are likely both to harm many individual women and to deepen some aspects of women’s group-based subordination to men. In what follows, I explain this claim with reference to one central example: that of anal sex.

The most cursory glance at Taormino’s career trajectory reveals her messianic enthusiasm for anal sex. Her first book, *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, launched her as a

highly visible spokeswoman for sex-positive feminism, and her identically titled porn video (1999) marked the beginning of her career as a porn director. Another book, *The Anal Sex Position Guide* (2009), and several additional porn films on the topic have ensued, and since 1999 Taormino has written the “Anal Advisor” column for the bondage/discipline/sado-masochism (BDSM)/fetish porn magazine *Taboo*, part of Larry Flynt’s *Hustler* empire.

In this sense, Taormino’s focus overlaps with that of the pornography industry generally, which during roughly the same period has increasingly fixated on anal penetration. Jensen (2007) explains that, “As legal constraints on pornography relaxed in the mid-1970’s and the normalizing of pornography began, pornographers started to look for ways to make their products edgy, and the first place they went was anal sex” (2007, p. 58). Over time, as the market became glutted with titles such as *Backdoor Baddies* and *Ass Factor*, even plain anal penetration became boring and humdrum. Pornographers thus looked for new ways to push the envelope, and practices such as double penetration (two men penetrating a woman simultaneously, one vaginally and one anally) and double anal (two men penetrating a woman’s anus at once) became prevalent. As one female porn vendor observes, referring to the industry’s relentless preoccupation with anal sex, “I think they forgot the other hole existed” (Goldberg, 2003).

It should thus not surprise us that rates of heterosexual anal sex have risen dramatically in the past two decades (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014). Nor is it surprising, given the primary consumer base of mainstream pornography, that many heterosexual men are urging their female partners to accept anal penetration. Often, they do not expect that the women will find the experience pleasurable. One man comments that “for most of my friends, it’s sort of a domination thing . . . basically getting someone in a position where they’re most vulnerable” (Rubin, 2007). Another observes that “Once a guy has anal sex, he’s put on a pedestal by his peers.” According to a third, “The physicality of it, being painful or whatever, shows how comfortable the girl is with you” (Rubin, 2007).

In this context, researchers Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) found, “submission to anal sex became a form of emotional labor women engaged in for their partner’s pleasure” (p. 509). As their research showed,

women simultaneously respond to external pressures to accommodate male fantasies (e.g., a boyfriend “begging” or directly requesting anal sex) and they create internal pressures to be sexually “normal” (e.g., believing they should compete with porn stars, hearing their friends describe anal sex as “cool,” etc.). (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014, pp. 513–514)

Similarly, a study of 130 teenagers in Britain found a “climate of coercion” surrounding anal sex, with “consent and mutuality not always a priority for the boys who are trying to persuade girls into having it” (Culzac, 2014). In Fahs and Gonzalez’s (2014) sample of twenty adult women, fully one quarter reported “overtly violent encounters with anal sex” (p. 510).

What, then, should we make of the striking convergence between Taormino's agenda and that of the pornographic mainstream, when it comes to anal sex? While undoubtedly some women genuinely enjoy being anally penetrated, at least the following is undeniable: Taormino's goal is to get *more* women to like and accept the same act that their male partners are also urging them to accept. Her work puts a happy, shiny, "feminist" gloss on the very set of expectations that many women and girls are already having difficulty fending off in their sexual lives.

In this connection, it is instructive to look to the beginning of Taormino's porn career to see what loyalties she demonstrated and what messages she chose to send. The opening scene of her *Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex* shows Taormino entering the offices of prominent pornographer John Stagliano, widely known as "Buttman," to try to convince him to fund and produce her film. She pleads with him:

I know that people are probably here all the time, asking you to make their movie, but I really, really, really want you to make my movie... I want it to be hot, really hot... I want to inspire women everywhere to get into anal sex. (Stagliano et al., 1999)

Stagliano displays reluctance, noting that Taormino is inexperienced and that his is "a high-class company." He then continues,

if you can get somebody like [performer] Ruby in the movie having anal sex, then I might be interested. Because Ruby, I can't get nothing in her fuckin' ass. She won't take nothing in her ass... If you can get her to take that [gestures] in her ass, then I'll help you produce the movie. (Stagliano et al., 1999)

Taormino immediately agrees, and we cut to a man bringing Ruby into the room. Stagliano explains the "proposition" to her:

We want to find out if you'd be interested in, maybe, uh, doing that thing that you always said that you didn't wanna do.... Tristan claims that anybody can do anal sex, and it doesn't have to hurt at all. (Stagliano et al., 1999)

Ruby expresses doubt and giggles nervously, but within seconds, we see Taormino penetrating Ruby both vaginally and anally with different objects, while Ruby uses a vibrator. Ruby moans, "Oh, I like this toy!" The scene ends.

Of course, we cannot know whether Ruby was truly reluctant to be anally penetrated or to what extent this scene was choreographed versus authentic. The point is that Taormino made a decision to tell a particular story, and that the story she tells sanitizes sexual pressure and manipulation while reinforcing rape myths—not least the idea that women who express disinclination to engage in particular sex acts, once pressed to do so anyway, find out that they love them. Despite the scene's inclusion in a celebratory 2003 documentary on feminist pornography, it is unclear what overlap exists between the messages of this scene and those of feminism.

Conclusion: Sex, Ethics, and Authenticity

Let me draw together some of the themes discussed herein by considering a three-column series that Taormino wrote for the *Village Voice* in 2006, entitled "Tomatoes Can Be Torture." In this series, Taormino recounts attending, as part of a BDSM event, a class on "erotic humiliation" taught by a couple who go by the names Femcar (the woman) and Phantom (the man). Their demonstration ventures into extreme territory: Phantom ties up Femcar, gives her an enema, throws tomatoes and other food on her, and urinates on her, inviting audience members to join in on both of the latter activities, which a number of them do. Taormino (2006a) reports feeling distress at what she is witnessing:

All I could think was, who are these guys? Their behavior just disturbed me. None of them seemed ambivalent, they just stepped right up, whipped out their dicks, and started calling her names. It's like someone gave them permission to be brutes and they went for it.

Much of the remainder of the series can be read as Taormino's attempt to talk herself out of her own discomfort. Above all, she reminds herself, it is all Femcar's own idea: "While their scenes might appear to... go beyond what is considered 'edge play,' they were absolutely consensual. In fact, the architect of their most extreme scenes, down to every last degrading detail, was always Femcar" (Taormino, 2006b). Here, again, we see Taormino's apparent conviction that any kind of sexual activity is impervious to criticism, provided that it is not only consensual but authentically desired. Ultimately, Taormino decides that she wants to "play" with Femcar herself, although she wonders if she can manage to be as "rough, cruel, and unrelenting" as Femcar wants. (She can, as it turns out.)

My point here is not merely to be damning, but rather to expose a tension in Taormino's views about authenticity. In part three of the series, reflecting on her own reactions to Femcar and Phantom, she says: "Whenever I see any scene that disturbs me, I am usually projecting my own shit onto it. It's tapping into something in me, so I look inward, whereas most people are quick to say, 'Those people are fucked up.'" (Taormino, 2006c). Taormino does not explain what kind of "shit" she harbors that leads her to have initial, misguided concerns about a crowd of men brutalizing and humiliating a woman sexually. Her view seems to be that one's sexual desires and responses are fully authentic, emanate apparently from nowhere, reflect one's deepest inner being, and are thus wholly self-justifying. Ethical concerns about virtually anything sexual, on the other hand, are just one's "own shit," which can and should be interrogated, reinterpreted, and/or suppressed. Such concerns are inauthentic and *not* self-justifying. Indulging them might lead to "policing or judging [someone's] desires, fantasies, and porn preferences," which, as Taormino assured *Cosmopolitan* (Breslaw, 2013), she has no interest in doing.

In conclusion, I do not know whether feminist pornography is possible. But even assuming it is possible, I have explained

herein why I believe Taormino's work falls radically short of the mark. Either it is feminist to celebrate and advertise women's "authentic" desire to be sexually dominated, or it is not. Either it is ethical and honorable to "play with" and promote dynamics of humiliation and violence that terrorize, maim, and kill women daily, or it is not. As Dworkin once put it (1983), "decide one more time" (p. 237).

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Notes

1. A number of philosophers have developed accounts of what it means for choices to be authentic, often as part of discussing concepts such as autonomy and/or adaptive preferences (see, e.g., Khader 2011; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Beyond broad philosophical definitions, it is also important to consider the specific social, cultural, and economic forces and personal histories that shape porn performers' preferences. While a consideration of these factors lies beyond the scope of this essay, many feminists—including women who have performed in pornography—have written insightfully about this set of issues (Dines, 2010; Jensen, 2007, Simonton & Smith, 2004).
2. For a disturbing look at these dynamics in the case of one young British woman who traveled to California to perform in pornography, see the documentary *Hardcore* (Walker, 2001).
3. Taormino might respond that the question is otiose since, again, her performers set their own pay rates. Most likely, her performers do typically require more for performing acts such as anal, gangbangs, and so on, regardless of their own desires and preferences: since standard industry practice is to pay more for these acts, arguably they would be foolish not to.
4. Regarding the use of similar euphemisms by male pornography consumers and reviewers, see Whisnant (2010).
5. See Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, and Liberman (2010) regarding the prevalence of these forms of aggression in mainstream, best-selling pornography.
6. Although the term "choking" is more commonly used colloquially, it refers to having foreign objects (such as food) blocking the windpipe. "Strangulation" is the correct term for having one's airflow cut off by something external, such as hands or a ligature.
7. Regarding dissociation and other typical reactions to trauma, see Herman (1992).

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