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## Women's sex/porn sanctuaries and social movements in Hong Kong and San Francisco

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the views and activities of sex activists and entrepreneurs in Hong Kong and San Francisco who were interviewed about the topic of queer and feminist pornography and its relationship to social movements. Hong Kong in recent years has become an exemplary East Asian protest site where questions of feminism, LGBTQ rights and erotic entertainment are negotiated at the borders of a larger democracy movement. For decades, San Francisco has been a mecca for LGBTQ activism, while also being at the forefront of queer pornography industries. This cross-cultural study and its ethnographic encounters will highlight and compare manners of queering porn and politics, while offering an interpretation of Judith Butler's writings on performativity and assembly as a way to understand contemporary activism and body politics. Finally, in a push to decolonize the myth of San Francisco as the more ideal erotic city, the article reflects on geo-political shifts affecting counter-cultural legacies of sexual collectivity and entertainment, including ongoing real-estate speculation coinciding with a global upsurge of supremacist governments.

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### Queering porn and politics

This article observes and reimagines feminist and queer sex/porn spaces as 'sanctuaries', or spaces dedicated to sex and pornography industry and/or culture that intersect with a broader social mission of social and political reflection and engagement. Since 1997 Hong Kong has been designated a Special Administrative Region within the People's Republic of China, with a unique legacy of legally endorsed sex entertainment and pornographic cinema. Hong Kong has also seen a recent upsurge in social activism against interference from the Chinese Communist Party, which peaked during the Umbrella Movement of autumn 2014. By examining this epoch in Hong Kong's history through interviews about women's sexualities and pornographies, this article contemplates the claims of Butler and Athanasiou that political dispossession involves a collective reimagining of the body's privacy and sexuality within a public/media sphere. The Hong Kong 'sanctuaries' and acts of queering politics will be compared to the porn industries and sex/porn spaces in San Francisco. In some ways similar to Hong Kong, San Francisco is at

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present and historically an epicentre of protest where feminists, queers and civil rights activists have rallied, building cooperatives and spaces of leisure that digress from an oppressive and influential corporate culture, as well as addressing sexual, racial or homophobic acts of violence. These acts of protest and spaces of refuge have intersected with the emergence of queer porn/sex toy industries, alternative art and educational centres, and queer celebrities who have reimagined and reconfigured what pornography means.

In her recent works on social movements and performativity, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Butler and Athanasiou 2013) and *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Butler 2015), Butler has posited a post-structuralist theory of sex/gender and the bodily dimensions of political activism that are relevant to the legacy of pornography as social engagement. Dispossession is theorized as a condition of being at once deprived and 'beyond oneself', or 'bound to others', resulting in values of collectivity and ad hoc acts of cooperation between 'women, queers, transgender people as well as the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless ... but also religious and racial minorities' (Butler 2015, 58). Therefore, according to the main tenet of post-structuralism, these assemblies are less focused on a unitary idea of subjectivity and freedom, and take into account heterogeneous and intersectional practices of activism and body politics (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 48). Butler believes in 'performativity' as unorthodox manners of collectively claiming or declaring rights within activist assemblies. As she writes: 'Acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political' (Butler 2015, 9). Activist assemblies can be seen as ad hoc declarations of human rights, including sex/gender and body politics that bring into question the meaning of democracy and its established political forms of deliberation (Butler 2015, 2). Butler also believes that assemblies can have the effect of relaxing the coercive norms on gendered life; hence, gender and sexual minorities would be able to breathe and move more freely in public and private spaces, as well as the zones that confound those two. She expresses her hope that such activist zones would enable queerness as an intense awareness of being burdened by social and gender norms, and artistic or bodily rituals to find relief: 'This very domain of susceptibility, this condition of being affected, is also where something queer can happen, where the norm is refused or revised, or where new formulations of gender begin' (Butler 2015, 32 and 64).

One example of a sanctuary established for the processing of social pressures and norms has been cited by Veronika Tzankova (2015), who has shown that women in Turkey have benefited greatly from porn consumption and have used it as a form of refuge despite the recent upsurge in censorship legislation and clampdown on civil rights. As she writes, porn has become a way through which women can find 'a break from daily routines' such as an exploration of lesbian fantasies and desires, excitement from observing stigmatized or forbidden sexual practices, and visual pleasures triggered by scenes of men serving as passive sexual objects (Tzankova 2015, 211). I am specifically interested in her analysis of online confessional narratives that are publicly available on Turkish websites, and in which women can remain anonymous while revealing their involvement in illegal or adulterous practices as well as porn consumption. The queer function of assembly on these sites is thus not only to activate a collective relaxation of norms and instigation of sexual creativity, but to do so as a way of demanding sex as an aspect of feminism and social justice.

Another example of a sanctuary built around acts of porn-making would be the San Francisco-based queer porn producer Pink & White Productions. As owner Shine Louise Houston explained, she does not believe herself to be a political activist but she showcases sexual diversity and non-conformist film scripts that are rejected within mainstream porn industries, and perhaps even by society at large (personal interview, San Francisco, September 29, 2015). There is a relaxing of society's bodily norms and a suspension of pornographic tropes and rote expectations, as further explained by San Francisco's leading queer performer, Jiz Lee, who is also the marketing director for Pink & White Productions. Lee explains that queering porn means encouraging performers to have sex while ignoring the most basic rules of pornographic performance. As they explain by means of an example:

There now is also a fair enough size audience that wants to see something which doesn't involve any kind of penetration. There are a couple of scenes on the Crashpad Series that do not have any penetration. They could be mutual masturbation or someone touching somebody else, but only on the external part, while nothing goes inside of the vagina or anus. It's really nice and refreshing for people who for whatever reason may not feel like they want to see a penetration at all, to be able to see that as an example of sex, because there is such an idea in our society that sex equals penetration of some kind. (Personal interview, San Francisco, September 29, 2015)

As will be seen, these acts of publicizing private sex acts can be seen as ways of collectively declaring pleasure and embodiment in such a way that interrogates the power of 'phallic' management within different sectors of society. This type of adversary sexual imagination can indeed stem from a desire to reimagine or halt supremacist or patriarchal body politics and the way that they affect urban cultures.

In Hong Kong, one of the core reasons behind the large-scale city occupations that came to be known as the Umbrella Movement was to lament the power of the pro-Beijing government's oligarchic stranglehold on the urban environment and its tangential neglect of youth activism and culture. In the Hong Kong round of interviews for this study, most participants were in their mid-twenties and many discussed various practical reasons for desiring sanctuaries within the city, one significant factor being a hyper real-estate market that has led to a total lack of basic affordable housing. That this hyper-inflated housing market affects younger people's sex lives was demonstratively taken up in August 2016 by the 25-year-old female politician Yau Wai-ching, who represents the localist party Youngspiration. She publicly declared that Hong Kong people indeed cannot find spaces to 'bang' in [Cantonese: *pok je*] as the government has a disdain for the younger generation and is unwilling to solve the city's deep housing crisis that engenders a lack or a denial of sexual activity (Jenkins 2016; Lai 2016). This statement manifested a young legislator's strategic intervention in Hong Kong politics, becoming her way of defining politics by declaring that having sex in the city is also a 'bottomline issue'.

In San Francisco, an ongoing housing crisis caused by a new influx of tech industries since the 1990s has equally affected alternative sex and porn culture. For instance, the home of a historical site of sex arts and education, the Center for Sex and Culture (CSC), located in the gentrified Mission District, has been directly threatened by incoming tech industries such as Google. Similarly, Pink & White is able to maintain its operations but as a porn industry experiences ongoing threats from conservative legislators, as well as stiff competition from mainstream online porn corporations. The remaining sections of

this article will look further into Hong Kong's and San Francisco's sex/porn sanctuaries and their different strategies for finding and maintaining a balance between sexual joy and political engagement.

### **Methodology: video-interviewing sex and porn innovators**

I carried out in-depth videotaped interviews in Hong Kong and San Francisco, recruiting about 15 participants in each city from within different sex-related professions, such as porn producers, artists, sex-shop owners, educators, archivists and LGBTQ activists. I recorded and analyzed these interviews and also uploaded edited segments on the research website.<sup>1</sup> It was difficult at times to have a consistent method for recruiting and interacting with participants across cultures, but I felt encouraged after attending an art opening at Hong Kong's 'sanctuary', the feminist sex shop Sally's Toy, where I and my assistant, Selene Zhang, gently solicited visitors, which resulted in fruitful interviews with 10 Hong Kong Chinese women and two mainland Chinese-born women residing in Hong Kong. I further visited and observed the workings of Sally's Toy for several days and managed to interview the four women who run and manage the store. I recruited additional participants by means of email invitations and a social media announcement, where I uploaded a description of the research project and invited people to respond. In San Francisco, I recruited participants through emailed invitations and by relying on existing personal and professional contacts. I spent six weeks interviewing participants in August 2015 and made additional trips to the ONE National Gay and Lesbian archives in Los Angeles. I also observed two porn shooting sessions at the Pink & White Studio in September 2015.

When people replied to my invitation and agreed to be interviewed, I stipulated the conditions of the interviews verbally and in writing. The interview would be recorded on camera and a small segment of the interview would be selected to upload on the website.<sup>2</sup> By signing the release form, participants were granted the right to preview the video segment before it would be uploaded. People were also given a chance to suggest alterations, to preserve their anonymity or to require that we edit out or obscure their faces.

During these interviews I was alone with the participants and I operated a very small handheld camera, which meant that the video quality is poor while, conversely, creating a level of comfort and intimacy. I held the interviews in the English language as most participants were somewhat proficient in English and agreed with that choice of language, but I also worked with Cantonese or Mandarin translators.

As a researcher I tried to maintain a balance between culling focused research-oriented information and opening up a variety of ways in which the topic was interpreted and commented on by participants. I suggested that people bring their own samples of pornography but I also told them that they could talk about sexual issues or politics in general. When I interviewed the people in San Francisco who coordinate large archives, they accessed a trove of erotica/porn in multiple genres, sizes and media; they also allowed me to take extensive audio-visual documentation. Some participants were accomplished artists or filmmakers whose works were discussed during the interview, while others brought along eclectic examples of pornography, art works or magazine articles that they wanted to comment on. Overall, some participants eagerly shared personal information and talked about porn's intimacies, while others maintained a discreet distance from sexual revelations and preferred to discuss political issues.

## Democracy dreaming and porn scepticism in Hong Kong

In August 2014, the Chinese Communist Party ruled that in the future Hong Kong citizens would not be able to hold direct democratic elections for its Chief Executive (the highest political office in Hong Kong) although these elections had been promised since the 1997 handover from the United Kingdom. When what came to be known as the Umbrella Movement spontaneously occupied three major thoroughfares in the city for an extended period of time, it deeply affected and influenced many sectors of the arts and higher education as well as feminists and LGBTQ groups.

In reference to Butler's theory of performativity, this was an ad hoc alliance of activist groups, of differing ages, ethnicities and sexual proclivities, which included media outlets, artist collectives and distinct personalities who were suddenly coalescing around the demand for various types of civil and political liberties. The Umbrella Movement became well known for its vast array of differing art and media forms, which included street architecture, photography, painting, performance and excessive online imagery and debates. The movement also stirred up a new generation of feminists and queers who sought to find new ways of enacting political engagement. There was an unusual interlocking of political ideology and sexuality debates, such as the large groups of young women (*fujoshis* or Boys' Love fans) who tacitly supported and 'queered' the movement by publishing online fantasies about the gay sex lives of student leaders. Lucetta Kam has demonstrated that there were LGBTQ activists who openly supported the Umbrella Movement, even though this interlocking of LGBTQ and political activism was also contested. Umbrella activists argued that these two types of advocacy should remain separated, while LGBTQ activists were cautious about declaring any specific political affiliation (Kam 2017, 172). When I interviewed my own selected group of sex/porn activists and artists one year after the movement, many testified that they had indeed been deeply affected by the large-scale effect of the Umbrella Movement.

As feminist filmmaker Shannon Walsh (2017) shows in her documentary 'Under the Umbrella', which she produced for the Arab English news service Al Jazeera, student activists were not a monolithic group but consisted of women and men from different cultural backgrounds, surprisingly including mainland Chinese students. One of Walsh's informants, Vicky Do, was a Vietnamese graduate student who became empathic with the political distress felt by Hong Kong. She opposed the imposition of mainland Chinese policies and empathized as a migrant with dispossessed youth. As she testified:

I thought Hong Kong would be like this beautiful diamond, everything splendid, but actually Hong Kong is so fragile, it can break anytime. And now I can see how people struggle to live. They cannot even pay the rent. (As quoted in Walsh 2017)

The first person I interviewed in Hong Kong for this study was a feminist performer nicknamed Notty Nuts Azure who supported and sexualized the movement by means of Facebook photography of her naked pregnant stomach. These photographs had a titillating effect while luring viewers into contemplating the political crisis of Hong Kong.

While many of the pro-Beijing political camp argued that Hong Kong democracy was an item that had to be delayed (or 'pocketed' as it was phrased in Hong Kong English), she believed that the moment had to be seized in order to make a feminist statement. Her

online nudity performances might only have been possible within the atmosphere of Umbrella Movement artforms as they hijacked the traditional methods of democracy; they were indeed also criticized by other activists (Jacobs 2016).

Other interviewees elucidated the power of the feminist sex shop as a sanctuary and community space for porn innovation and political engagement. When I interviewed Miki S. and Lisa H., who are in their mid-twenties and work as sales representatives in the sex shop Sally's Toy, they were busy wrapping sex toys purchased by online customers. Their testimonies were heavily focused on Hong Kong's recent political crisis but their daily chores of serving online customers gave them a sense of hope and direction in the politically depressed city. Miki also runs Sticky Rice Love, an online sexual health platform for teenagers, which holds ad hoc workshops and symposiums about sexual health and LGBTQ politics in different venues around the city. She is a firm believer in promoting pornography education as part of teenagers' sexual health, and points out the extent to which Hong Kong teenagers are influenced by the overstated representations of bodies and genitals in Japanese pornography (personal interview, Hong Kong, May 12, 2016).

I also gathered testimonies from Sally's Toy owner Vera Liu and her long-term sales associate Martina Ngai. In total, Sally's Toy consists of three stores in Hong Kong, two of which are located in the upscale downtown areas of Central and Causeway Bay, and one in the suburban working-class neighbourhood of Tsuen Wan. The downtown shops are located on the upper floors of one of Hong Kong's typical high-rise buildings. Rents are much cheaper in these locations and in the evenings young consumers tend to aggregate and socialize in these spaces. It is particular to Hong Kong's dense cityscape that these upper-floor retail spaces are in close proximity to the city's major sites of political assembly and activism. When I interviewed Martina Ngai, she volunteered to give me a tour of Causeway Bay streets, pointing out exactly where the gay pride parades had taken place and what part of the inner-city district had been occupied during the Umbrella Movement. As one can see in the video documentation of this walk with Martina, it is an extremely noisy and densely packed district where high rents have caused the demise of traditional Chinese stores and pharmacies. It is hard to imagine protesters marching and chanting through these streets, but it is in fact an ideal site for attracting attention and disrupting the everyday activities of the shopping masses.<sup>3</sup>

Vera Liu, owner of Sally's Toy, states that while her shop in Causeway Bay is frequented by many sexually open-minded youth, she cannot envision an era of queer or feminist porn industry in Hong Kong. Although she is aware of Hong Kong's history of softcore erotic cinema and the new international trends in feminist porn, she admits to being frustrated about selling these videos either online or in the store. Sally's Toy is currently not able to sell porn videos but does have books with erotica that, according to Hong Kong law, have to be wrapped and have 30% of their surface covered. Hong Kong sex entertainment is protected by laws that are different from those of mainland China, although in actuality industries and activists alike are easily sued by individuals and religious organizations who report on so-called obscene materials through the Obscene Articles Tribunal, a judiciary body that classifies submitted materials and decides on their relative obscenity. At the time of writing this article in October 2016, several lesbian magazines had been removed from the store's shelves after an anonymous complaint had been lodged with the Obscene Articles Tribunal. This official body determines in court whether the article is obscene or not. Liu explained that if she wanted to start selling porn videos, it would



be far more complicated as they would all have to be pre-screened and classified by the Obscene Articles Tribunal, who additionally charges a hefty fee for their activities.

According to Lui, pornography distribution and production are not an option for Sally's Toy and it remains to be seen whether the company will ever be able to move in that direction. Martina added that Sally's Toy is trying to branch out into transgender or fat-positive sex products, but their customers tend to look for more mainstream products, especially in the suburban store of Tsuen Wan where they have relatively more male customers shopping for 'condoms and masturbation cups'. Liu also believes that, overall, in terms of Euro-American queer taste cultures, her Hong Kong customers would typically reject those. The goal of queer pornography as a platform for education about non-dogmatic beauty and the relaxation of norms was thus, in Hong Kong, not an easy one. As Liu states:

It just all that education comes from within the mass media, from school, from our peers, from our parents. It is always like all this information that we get is about growing-up or suggests the very dogmatic type of beauty that people like. It just like all the images on TV promote a kind of 'Miss HK' norm – they have to be skinny, white, and have very good skin, and absolutely no fat anywhere. So this is the only type of beauty that we can accept in Hong Kong. (Personal interview, Hong Kong, April 29, 2016)

Another interviewee, Popo G, of the online sex platform Good Moaning, equally testified that it is very difficult to promote alternative bodily norms within Hong Kong Chinese culture. For the purposes of the interview, she presented glossy life-style magazines featuring Chinese men who 'are forced' to have extra-marital affairs because their wives have 'disappointing' bodies. Other magazines stereotyped young women as extremely timid and afraid of their first sexual experiences. Popo G talked about those negative stereotypes and applied them to how Hong Kong people judge naked bodies, including her own body. As she explained:

In Hong Kong, fat is not pretty. Period. Or for instance, when I was in secondary school, there was a guy saying, and I actually had a crush on him at that time, that I was boob-less. I felt so bad as I had a crush on him. So bad. And since that moment I have kept wearing my big leather jacket all the time. Just like today, as you saw, I walked in wearing that leather jacket. (Personal interview, Hong Kong, May 14, 2016)

She also wanted to make a difference and showed a Tibetan sex manual with a chapter on the meaning of eight different types of 'moaning' during female orgasm. She stated that Hong Kong people should have similarly developed and imaginative sexual tastes, but she believed that in actuality they were often disappointing and not that interested in sex.

Popo G also brought along a porn clip by the Swedish feminist pornographer Erica Lust, entitled 'Try My Boyfriend'. She explained her reasons for selecting this clip:

'Try My Boyfriend' is one of my favorite porn movies from Erica Lust, in which she collects women sexual fantasies and picks the best stories and then she goes out and films them. And I selected a sexual fantasy about a girl who is willing to share her boyfriend because he can do something really good ... he is really good at cunnilingus. So I really like this clip because first of all, it's not just a visually stimulating movie but there's thinking behind it. Yes here we can see that it is possible not only to share good movies or good restaurants with our friends. We could even share our boyfriend if he is good. So this is quite a new way of thinking. (Personal interview, Hong Kong, May 10, 2016)



Popo G., Miki S. and another interviewee, Anna, reiterated that traditional Chinese culture tends to promote a starkly negative view around diverging standards of beauty. Miki S. grew up with the notion that her own Chinese body was inferior to the tall skinny white bodies of commercial advertising. Anna believed that there was a fundamental strong bias against 'average Chinese' body types:

Almost 80% of MTR's Advertisements are about slimming, changing the shape of your face, your hips, your skin. You know, just to keep correcting your body, that is how you will be seen as attractive in the society. Like you are not ever good enough. And it is not just about your body. It's your whole personality as well. Or for instance, if you look masculine as a woman, then people will just directly say 'Oh' . . . . The local HK term is 'like man's head' [*naam yan tau*]. And then they will maybe think that like that person is not straight. (Personal interview, Hong Kong, June 6, 2016)

Indeed, many of the Hong Kong interviewees testified that they had internalized very judgmental attitudes towards non-normative bodies. But in terms of supporting sexual or racial diversity within porn aesthetics, they felt dissociated from Euro-American queer porn aesthetics. Neither did they think of themselves as 'racial minorities' because they felt that they represented the dominant Hong Kong Chinese ethnicity. They were unable to endorse affirmative racialized self-representations as they saw them as being defined by western cultures.

Popo G explained further that Hong Kong people are 'victims' of the 'East meets West' myth that is excessively promoted by the Hong Kong government and corporate business campaigns. She grew up feeling quite alienated from traditional Chinese culture and in conflict with her parents, while also feeling disconnected from Japanese and western porn representations (personal interview, Hong Kong, May 6, 2016). Several people, including Diane, who is a reputable queer activist from mainland China residing in Hong Kong, agreed that, overall, western porn depicting white bodies was unattractive to her, even if these porn productions embraced western ideals of diversity, which she did support on an intellectual level. For Diane, Chinese examples of pornographic diversity would have to include different non-white bodies as well as entire different porn genres, such as the highly popular sexually explicit Boys' Love (homo-erotic manga/anime) or lesbian online literary stories of their first sexual experiences.

### **Brittle sanctuaries in the San Francisco Bay Area**

In the USA I visited San Francisco rather than the more typical porn cities, Los Angeles or Miami, as historically San Francisco has accommodated radical sex cultures that are closely tied up with social movements. Many of the activist-inclined youngsters who migrated to San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s joined the women's and/or gay liberation movements due to their leftist views. Moreover, just like the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, there was an urge to reclaim and politicize the urban environment by lifting the barriers between private and public experiences of the body and sexuality. As the well-known gay activist Clive Jones has emphasized in his memoir of San Francisco movements, there were acts of solidarity between segregated interest groups, such as women's organizations and gays, as they mutually fended off 'furies' from hostile politicians within the San Francisco city government and police force, as well as 'fag bashers' who frequently attacked or even

murdered gays (Jones 2016, 47; see also Sides 2009, 7). The San Francisco urban environment was contested by sexually radical and conservative groups alike, who lamented being 'dispossessed' by their city.

Paradoxically, one of the most active protesters was liberal politician Dianne Feinstein who strongly opposed any type of pornography and sex industries and who rallied in different neighbourhoods. There were also ongoing tensions between sexually conservative feminists and the more sexually adventurous lesbian organizations that started promoting alternative sex practices such as the use of sex toys and BDSM. As the gay counterculture exploded in the Castro and Haight Ashbury districts, feminist and lesbian organizations moved south towards the Mission district, which was already home to various Mexican and Central American gay groups who somehow managed to coexist with the feminists (Sides 2009, 115 and 147).

In recent years, independently owned centres of arts and education such as the Institute of the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (IASHS) and CSC, which is located in the Mission district, have contributed to this civil rights legacy by implementing porn-positive pedagogies and community outreach models. The IASHS itself has played an important role in advocating for the rights of sexual minorities in the USA, and the destigmatization of pornography in particular. Both interviewees Annie Sprinkle and Carol Queen are alumni of the IASHS and have furthered its activist mission through queer and sexually explicit art works and curatorial programmes. This legacy has now also encouraged a generation of queer porn industry lobbyists, as exemplified by queer celebrity Jiz Lee, who canvassed against a proposed ballot for industry regulation, Proposition 60, in the California ballot initiatives of 2016. This proposition would have allowed the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration to bring charges anytime a condom was not visible in a pornographic film; it would also have allowed any California resident to sue a pornographer and obtain their personal information. The proposition failed to pass as the opposition successfully argued that it would have cost millions of taxpayer dollars to enforce, that actors and companies would have been prone to frivolous lawsuits, and that the proposition entailed an overall curtailing of sex workers' rights and safety.

The civil-rights legacy has given rise to feminist and queer pornographies as economically and culturally viable models of online retail and activist outreach that are patronized by niche-seeking audiences. Rachael Liberman (2015) has demonstrated that these industries have had a large impact on American women's attitudes towards gender and sex entertainment in general. Both queer and heterosexual women from the liberal urban middle classes endorse feminist pornography as a valid alternative to mainstream misogynist content.

Lynn Comella has done in-depth research on the historical impact of the San Francisco feminist sex shop Good Vibrations. This unique 'sex shop with a mission' set out to offer an alternative retail environment that presented customers with much-needed social services or even a kind of on-site sexual therapy that included 'education, empowerment and personal transformation' (Comella 2013, 86). The business itself was set up on 1960s/1970s countercultural values that strongly opposed corporate greed and emphasized humanistic management, cooperative decision-making and transparent accounting. Additionally, sales associates received an in-depth education about sexual diversity and the power of communicating about sex (Comella 2017, 58). The philosophy of the store was to

oppose the typically 'sleazy' male-oriented adult store by designing a clean, respectable and comfortable sanctuary of pleasure and education for workers and customers. For that reason, founder Joani Blank was originally opposed to carrying certain types of 'vulgar' or 'distasteful' sex products, such as books about BDSM sexuality or any commercial porn videos. But the company slowly accepted the idea that porn would be an indispensable tool to enhance sexual education and empowerment. In 1989 they opened a porn library of selected videos curated by Susie Bright, and between 2001 and 2003 they produced a few educational porn videos, but eventually they ceased production and started distributing porn movies through a video on-demand site (Comella 2017, 122).

Several of the San Francisco interviewees, such as Shine Louise Houston and Carol Queen, have previous connections to or work experience at Good Vibrations. Carol Queen is currently the cultural programmer at Good Vibrations and director of the CSC, which hosts a large historical archive of erotica and pornography productions, while also organizing community outreach, art exhibitions and workshops. The CSC actively promotes the idea that sexual archives and education should be made available to the public. One of the librarians at the CSC, Library Vixen, was interviewed while showing off the historical collections that include queer erotica, novels, sex manuals, personal diaries and zines, all made available through exhibitions or online.

The education and outreach mission of the CSC is also inspired by that of the IASHS, which historically has trained and certified sexologists by means of a radical pedagogy. Ted McIlvenna, a non-conformist Methodist minister and sexologist, established a unique porn-positive curriculum while countering the opposition of right-wing legislators and the Roman Catholic Church.

IASHS librarian Jerry Zientara arrived in San Francisco during the summer of love (1967) and set up courses around LGBTQ (auto)ethnographies while also analyzing materials from their massive sex and porn archives. The curriculum also included the practice of publicly expressing and analyzing diversified sex practices by performing in sex movies. These were referred to as 'patterning' movies and were produced by students in collaboration with a film crew which were then screened and commented upon inside the classroom. In the 1970s and 1980s these films were distributed and sold to medical schools, where they were used in courses on human sexuality.

Prof. Jerry Zientara at the IASHS testified to the importance of these 'patterning' movies in the ways students would have sex on camera and then reflected on their performances:

It was a very courageous program and quite a number of movies were made. The premise was that after the film was made, the participants would get to look at the edited version and decide whether it accurately reflected their behaviors or not – they could 'retell' the film so to speak. (Personal interview, San Francisco, August 20, 2015)

Carol Queen agrees that the 'patterning films' were some of the most important predecessors to feminist and queer porn in the San Francisco area. These movies featured diversified and previously unseen sex acts, and encouraged students to publicly express personal states of affect around sexuality. As Queen explains:

I think that IASHS is a really important link that showed people that it was possible to make explicit movies that try to express things almost like a documentary, the reality of somebody's sex lives. It's especially important if you're trying to document sexual diversities. (Personal interview, San Francisco, August 22, 2015)

The process of the ‘patterning’ films, involving self-expression, control of editing, the option to redo and the proviso for self-reflection, are practices still commonly used in today’s queer porn.

Pink & White Productions is currently San Francisco’s best known queer porn company, located between the Mission district and Potrero Hill. The company offers a new model of ethically-based labour and queer-friendly products, and reaches out to people who have been excluded or less represented in pornographic media. The website<sup>4</sup> is a properly licensed and for-profit porn site in which videos are uploaded on a regular basis. The website also invites people from the LGBTQ community to apply for a porn shoot and selects applicants after negotiating the actual terms with them. The company does not work with a talent agency and does not look for a particular type of performer, instead encouraging potentially diverse performers and applicants to apply. These performers do not adhere to conventional notions of gender, beauty or body type but are ‘gender queer’, as explained in the mission statement:

Our queer porn casts ‘real life couples’ who identify as dykes and lesbians, femme, masculine of center (boi, stud, tomboy, AG and butch) and can be cis or trans women, people of color, people of ie, older queers, and people with disabilities (including neurodivergent). Performers choose what they want to do on camera, so it’s common to see things like safer sex, role-play with on screen check-ins and communication, strap-ons, kink and BDSM, orgasms and aftercare.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, most of these performers diverge radically from the streamlined and toned bodies of mainstream commercial pornography. Director Shine Louise-Houston caters to those least represented in porn while positioning this type of diversity as a positive asset rather than a problem in terms of its potential economic value. The performers are paid for their labour but they participate for other reasons besides financial gain – most likely to become better bonded with LGBTQ communities by means of publicized sex acts. Most of them have no experience of porn-making, while some are professional porn models who want to enjoy a different mode of experience. Many of the sex acts deviate from the aesthetics of porno-normativity and encourage sexual pleasure by means of a wide range of sex acts.

Jiz Lee is Pink & White’s manager and a celebrity performer whose notion of diversity stems from their rich experiences with queer and mainstream porn-making. Lee knows from experience that performers in the mainstream porn industry have preconceived notions of good sex, while the Crashpad website consistently gives up, breaks down or opens up those norms. On the Crashpad set, one is not obliged to follow the standard pornographic norms of bodily appearance such as shaving one’s pussy; neither does the sex act need to include fundamental hardcore aesthetics such as achieving orgasm by means of penetration. When I observed two performers starting their sex session in the Pink & White studio, they started with a quite intensive wrestling match, which, as was explained to me later, was an ode to Jiz Lee, who had wrestled on the floor with their partner in one of the earliest episodes.

The San Francisco porn terrain described here has grown out of sex-positive feminism and LGBTQ activism as practiced within sex industries. But even though San Francisco has a strong history of lobbying for civil rights and porn culture, as many of my interviewees testified, in more recent years the city has been significantly altered by a tech-industry-oriented

economy that endorses a more mainstream type of sex culture and ideology. It became clear during my fieldwork that I was capturing a particular moment in sex/porn history and that these institutions were grappling with aspects of political backlash alongside economic survival. For instance, the CSC is located in a section of the Mission District that is currently being bought up by tech industries and an influx of new young entrepreneurs. As Queen explained:

For the past 50, 60 years, maybe longer, many people have come to Bay Area because of their sexuality and because of the role that SF has in the sexual imagination. That's not why this new influx of people are coming. Some of them may be queer. Some of them may be feminist. But they are coming for good jobs. They are engaged in a kind of gold rush that is associated with the tech-world.

And while they're doing it, they are affecting the ability of people who hold the culture together to stay here. That's what happening with the Center for Sex and Culture. The high-tech companies are right around here in the Mission. We are actually losing our space. They are raising the rent. There's no longer a part of town that is obviously the part of town where if you were doing real queer business, you could go to. (Personal interview, San Francisco, August 22, 2015)

A similar outcry against the gentrification of the Bay Area came from Nenna Joiner, who is a producer of black lesbian pornography and who owns the sex shop Feelmore Adult Gallery located in Oakland. While the legendary San Francisco company Good Vibrations emphasizes a mission of sexual tolerance and diversity, in actuality its staff only became ethnically diverse in the late 1990s and it originally catered mostly to white middle-class customers (Comella 2017, 164). Good Vibrations has meanwhile expanded its demographics by operating in six different city locations, while founder Joani Blank has supported Joiner in opening her own black-owned sex shop in Oakland.

Joiner is also a porn producer/director, and has made two movies, *Tight Places: A Drop of Color* (2011) and *Hella Brown: Real Sex and the City* (2012), that show queer sex with performers from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Her films are prime examples of independent cinema depicting 'the least represented in pornography' and they have made a significant impact at various film festivals. *Tight Places* casts a new light on the 'dark skinned' body by enlisting actors of different ethnicities, while *Hella Brown* shows performers who all identify as African-American.

Joiner explains the proclivities of her customer base by pointing out that it was harder to find international distribution for the movie *Hella Brown* as the majority of customers still prefer lighter skinned actors and actresses.

While Joiner tries to cater to Oakland customers and an ethnically diverse clientele through her sex shop and film productions, the African-American owned and operated businesses around her are disappearing fast:

Right now what you are seeing is a space full of construction, laying new foundation for a new type of business structure to come in and to benefit from the community in downtown Oakland. This once was a profoundly African-American community with many other communities of indigenous people. Those businesses and people have been systematically moved out and other people have come in to take those places. New shops are coming. (Personal interview, Oakland, September 12, 2015)

Following the intention of her activist-oriented company logo 'Our Bullets Don't Hurt', which refers to the term 'bullet' for an anal sex toy, she seeks to cater to a demographic

specific to Oakland that has experienced a long history of gun violence and oppression by the police; a segment of the population who are often associated, in the mass media, with sexual diseases. Although she is keen on doing business with this local population, she is also deeply invested in community outreach and trying to keep her sanctuary afloat.

## Conclusion

One might think that social/political movements are divorced from changes in the sex entertainment and porn industries, but this article shows that the opposite could be the case. By surveying sex/porn entrepreneurs and their community spaces as ‘sanctuaries’ in Hong Kong and San Francisco, the article shows that porn innovation and porn industry ethics are directly related to legacies of political activism and civil rights or democracy movements. Fieldwork in Hong Kong was carried out in 2015 after the Umbrella Movement had dwindled, while the USA political climate was about to be turned on its head through the election of extreme right-wing president, Donald Trump, in November 2016.

In Hong Kong the article uncovers an eclectically bonded network of sex innovators who are at the frontier of the feminist sex industry and who also strongly believe in political activism. They talked about their mission to serve sexual minorities and diversify Chinese sex entertainment, but they were sceptical about Euro-American aesthetics of queer pornography. Instead they emphasized a new type of independent porn-friendly sex education and a respect for localized porn genres such as sexually explicit Boys’ Love manga and anime. These young Chinese activists and sexperts also testified to being burdened by the restrictive bodily norms and tastes of the mainstream Chinese culture, and about how censorship practices are negatively affecting the local porn industry, yet they are devoted to defending pornography and eroticizing Hong Kong sex education.

The San Francisco advent of queer porn has grown out of decades of civil rights and anti-censorship activism and radical types of sex education involving pornographic self-representation and expression. At the same time, these advances in alternative sex culture have almost always been contested as well as threatened or displaced by burgeoning corporate tech companies as well as political opposition. These forces within their different societies have intensely shaped the relative distribution of feminist and queer pornography while also proving to be highly stimulating topics of debate amongst activists.

## Notes

1. See [www.womenspornographies.com](http://www.womenspornographies.com) (accessed February 16, 2018).
2. See note 1.
3. Video documentation of Martina Ngai’s interview can be found online. <https://www.womenspornographies.com/martina> (accessed December 1, 2017).
4. See [www.crashpadseries.com](http://www.crashpadseries.com) (accessed February 15, 2018).
5. See the Pink & White mission statement online. [www.crashpadseries.com](http://www.crashpadseries.com) (accessed November 1, 2017).

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