Confession, sexuality and pornography as sacred language

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Abstract
This article explores the connection between religious and sexual sources of personal meaning. It revisits the analyses of modern sexuality offered by Michel Foucault and Catharine MacKinnon to argue that an understanding of the role of sexuality in religious confessional discourse sheds new light on the role of pornography in contemporary culture. Pornography can be understood as a popular discourse with effects analogous to the elite discourse, rooted in confession, examined by Foucault. This analysis reveals ways that Foucault’s attention to religious texts might shed more direct light on lived sexualities, and the relationship between sexuality, spirituality and notions of the sacred in contemporary culture.

Keywords
Foucault, MacKinnon, pornography, religion, sexuality

Lamenting the decline of spirituality in American culture, Cornel West has suggested that the meaning people derive from their sexuality has taken on a religious significance. ‘The body may be a poor vessel for transcendence, yet it now is the last such vessel for many . . . [For young people] transcendence itself is incarnate in the lived experience of sexual stimulation’ (1993: 155–156). In this article I propose to explore that connection, and in doing so revisit two of the most prominent analyses of modern sexuality: those offered by Michel Foucault and Catharine MacKinnon. I argue that Foucault’s analysis of the religious origins of the impulse toward sexual confession, and the interpretation of sexual urges as central to our being, offers unexpected points of connection with MacKinnon’s analysis of contemporary sexuality. Further, MacKinnon’s analysis, with its focus on the
mass-discourse of pornography rather than the elite discourse examined by
Foucault, reveals ways that Foucault’s attention to texts might shed more direct
light on lived sexualities. Finally, I suggest that the perspective of religious meaning
offers new ways to understand the power of certain understandings of sexuality in
our culture.

The academic battles over pornography that gained prominence in the 1980s
and 1990s have largely subsided. At that time MacKinnon’s lawyerly interest in
finding an actionable violation in the production of pornography led her to focus
upon proving that pornography did not constitute mere free expression, but com-
mittted ‘real’ harm upon women. Some of the more universalist and essentialist
claims about language and representation lent themselves to incisive critiques –
in particular those offered in Butler’s Excitable Speech and Brown’s States of
Injury. But little effort has been made, by MacKinnon or others, to recast her
analysis in the light of those critiques. In subsequent years, pornography has,
with the rise of the internet, become more ubiquitous than either side of this
debate could have imagined at the time.1

With the fading of the academic debate, even in the face of the expansion
of pornography as a pervasive cultural phenomenon, many insights lying
within MacKinnon’s analysis of pornography and sexuality have been lost.
Butler herself acknowledges that MacKinnon’s arguments are ‘as compelling as
they are problematic’ (1997: 82), and Brown frames her engagement with
MacKinnon as addressing MacKinnon’s ‘extraordinary political purchase’ (1995:
77). Revisiting MacKinnon’s analysis can help us understand pornography
not from the perspective of actionable speech, but from the perspective of
religious meaning. Bringing the religious perspective to sexual meaning, in turn,
suggests new ways of understanding the role of the pornographic in
contemporary sexuality as well as contemporary conceptions of community
and polity.

Having framed sexuality in terms of religious meaning, West asks, ‘How does
one account for the privileged role of sexual activity in our society?’ (1993: 155).
MacKinnon’s account of sexuality, when revisited from the perspective of
religious discourse, can help provide an answer. To do so I bring Foucault’s anal-
ysis of sexual discourse in the practice of confession and religious self-understand-
ing in his History of Sexuality Volume I, to bear on MacKinnon’s ideas. The
analysis also sheds new light on Foucault’s notions of the origins of modern
sexual discourse in religion – as I show that MacKinnon offers a more compelling
account of certain class effects of modern sexual discourse that Foucault gestures
toward but does not explain. I then turn to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and
Benedict Anderson to suggest ways to build upon the insights regarding sexual
and religious discourse that emerge from this juxtaposition of MacKinnon’s and
Foucault’s ideas.

MacKinnon has noted a commonality between the work she began in the 1970s
and the work Foucault was doing regarding sexuality. ‘[M]y view was that the
relation between knowledge and power was the central issue... and that sexuality
was where this issue was crucially played out... Unknown to me, Foucault may have been writing on similar themes...’ (2000: 687). Leo Bersani commented that many of Foucault’s conclusions regarding masculine sexuality ‘one could easily take as coming from the pens of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin’ (1988: 212). Bersani suggests MacKinnon’s characterizations of gender dynamics in contemporary sexuality, ‘in a sense... merely develop the implicit moral logic of Foucault’s more detached and therefore more respectable formulation’ (1988: 214). In mentioning Foucault’s ‘detachment’, Bersani hints at one idea this article will explore: that MacKinnon’s analysis may offer a level of engagement with the way sexuality is lived that offers a useful supplement to Foucault. In doing so, MacKinnon’s work allows us to rethink the relationship between sexuality and lived religion, as opposed to religious doctrine and elite religious discourse.

**MacKinnon and Foucault on sex and confession**

The gist of MacKinnon’s conclusions about sexuality and the role it plays in the construction of the genders is clear. This is largely because she isolates a rather specific place to look for an unalloyed account of what men believe about women: pornography. Pornography, she suggests, conveys the message that women’s sexuality is inextricably linked to force and violation (1989: 169). MacKinnon claims that society believes what pornography maintains, that women need to be forced, either a little or a lot, in order to enjoy their sexuality. In pornography the use of coercion by men against women is ‘made sexuality... and liberating of women’s true nature’ (1989: 137). ‘Love of violation, variously termed female masochism and consent, comes to define female sexuality...’ In this system, a victim, usually female, always feminized, is “never forced, only actualized”” (1989: 141). In response to this understanding of female sexuality, men can take on a heroic role – men perceive the repressed sexuality lurking within women, and ‘help’ them to realize it. For such claims MacKinnon offers some intriguing evidence – for example, a rape law in which the victim must prove conclusively both that force was used in the sexual act and that she made it clear that she did not consent to it. The assumption on the part of the law is that women sometimes want to be forced, and that men have a right to assume it.

MacKinnon maintains that sexual desire is the thing that is closest to us – most important to us and therefore central to our sense of self. Foucault’s analysis of the intertwining strands of sexual and religious discourse largely agrees. Explaining the roots of our contemporary impulse towards confession, and locating those roots within a monastic setting, he claimed that discourse came to focus upon desire because it was perceived to be the meeting place between the body and the soul:

the most important moment of transgression [shifted] from the act itself to the stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire. For this was an evil that afflicted the whole man, and in the most secret of forms... Discourse, therefore, had to trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following all its
meanderings: beneath the surface of the sins, it would lay bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh. (Foucault, 1990: 19–20)

In this way, truth and sex became deeply intertwined within the confessional discourse. To confess was to unearth and reveal the truth about oneself: ‘it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place’ (1990: 60).

For MacKinnon, if a ‘constraint’ appears to hold the secret truth about some group that is locked up within sexuality, then that group is women. Men are the group that feels empowered, and is socially constructed as empowered, to extract that truth. Foucault also identified a group empowered to elicit sexual truth from those who have ‘repressed’ it:

[Confession] is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated. (Foucault, 1990: 61–62)

This ritual, and the relationship of authority that was contained within it, began in the monasteries and spread to the relationship between the priest and his diocese, and eventually out of the church. Foucault explained that confession ‘gradually lost its ritualistic and exclusive localization; it spread; it has been employed in a whole series of relationships: children and parents, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts’ (1990: 63). This list leaves out one important kind of relationship: the one between lovers. What is curious about Foucault’s list is that everyone seems to be talking about sex except for the people who are having it.

That is precisely the talk that interests MacKinnon. She would expect, in all this sex talk (and it is mostly heterosexual talk that concerns her), the man to play the role of authority and the woman that of confessor. Where Foucault saw the prodding of the parish priest or scientific expert, MacKinnon sees the provocation that passes as courtship and the cajoling that accompanies foreplay. Foucault implied indirectly that this talk between lovers has been important in the historical deployment of sexuality. The confessional culture ‘endowed sex with an inexhaustible and polymorphous causal power. The most discrete event in one’s sexual behavior – whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or an excess – was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one’s existence’ (1990: 65). If each sexual act is imbued with such power to explain who we are within the confessional culture, that power must operate as lovers negotiate and engage in sexual acts.

It is possible that people stumble through their sexual experiences in some sort of ecstatic stupor, and only later begin to catalogue what they did and did not do, to confess as much to an authority and to suffer the consequent knowledge of
themselves. It seems more likely, however, that we engage in this process in a more continual fashion. It is not just the discourses that are occurring after sexual experiences, but before them and during them that have been made to carry the weight of privileged access to a religious or quasi-religious truth about ourselves. To try and get a partner to participate in some sexual behavior by suggesting they will enjoy it, or even to introduce a new experience without any negotiation but a wordless one between bodies, is in Foucault’s terms to introduce ‘something capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one’s existence’.

This idea, here derived from Foucault’s analysis, is just what causes MacKinnon concern. According to Foucault, confessional culture assumed that a ‘principle of latency’ is inherent to sexuality (1990: 66). This latency meant there was a ‘labor of confession’ in which the confessor had to be pushed and prodded to understand and reveal the truths about their soul that sexuality revealed. If, as I have suggested, confessional sexual discourse is not wholly distinct from the communication that goes on between lovers leading up to, during, and after sexual experiences themselves, then the conclusion that Foucault derives from the principle of latency takes on a decidedly MacKinnonite coloration: ‘[a difficult confession] had to be extracted, by force, since it involved something that tried to stay hidden’ (Foucault, 1990: 66). This is precisely the message about women’s sexuality that MacKinnon finds in pornography. Focusing on a more elite discourse, Foucault suggests, ‘one could plot a line going straight from the seventeenth-century pastoral to what became its projection in literature, “scandalous” literature at that’ – a statement Foucault follows with a lengthy quotation from de Sade (1990: 21).

**Ars erotica and sexual authority**

The interconnections between Foucault’s analysis of the historical deployment of sexuality and MacKinnon’s characterization of contemporary sexuality can be reconceived in terms Foucault used to discuss the ancient and eastern *ars erotica* – an art that Foucault claims ‘on the face of it at least’ has been largely absent from the West since the classical age (1990: 58). In these erotic arts, a master who holds sexual secrets gradually reveals them to an apprentice. But while ancient *ars erotica* worked from the top down, the western confessional sexuality whose emergence Foucault described relied on a conception of truth and knowledge that works from the bottom up.

By virtue of the power structure immanent in it, the confessional discourse cannot come from above, as in the *ars erotica*, through the sovereign will of the master, but rather from below, as an obligatory act of speech which, under some imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness. (1990: 62)

But Foucault hedged this claim to an extent. He noted that in fact confession involves a ‘whole series of methods that had much in common with an erotic art: guidance by the master along a path of initiation, the intensification of experiences
extending down to their physical components, the optimization of effects by the discourse that accompanied them' (1990: 70). In the West, Foucault thought, elements of the erotic arts were found in the ‘multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of the truth about sex… [for example] the learned volumes, written and read’ (1990: 71). MacKinnon might note that it is no longer ‘learned volumes’ that are the most common reading material regarding truths about sex. Pornography, largely pictorial, but with text or dialogue rarely entirely absent, has proliferated and gained a popularity to eclipse any and all learned volumes.

A good deal of mainstream pornography certainly does make claims to truth about sexuality. One could argue in fact that much of mainstream pornography’s relationship to truth borders on an obsession with authenticity and the reality of the depiction. Care is taken to assure the consumer, in the text or discourse that accompanies the visuals, that everything they might expect to be true of the women who appear in pornography is very true indeed: soft core models really do find it liberating to remove their clothing in order to tantalize men; and hard core performers love repeated gagging and excruciating anal sex. Correspondence from readers insists that although ‘I was sure all the letters sent into your magazine were made up…’ the writer has recently had an experience that demonstrates that these magazines depict the truth about sexuality, and particularly women’s sexuality. The idea that pornography might operate as a contemporary ars erotica, suggests an answer to a question raised by Foucault: ‘Must we conclude that our sciencia sexualis is but an extraordinarily subtle form of ars erotica, and that it is the Western, sublimated version of that seemingly lost tradition?’ (1990: 71). One answer is that in contemporary culture, pornography offers an ars erotica that are not very subtle nor particularly sublimated.

The idea of pornography as a less ‘learned’ ars erotica leads to a larger question about Foucault’s analysis, particularly the extent to which he is describing the deployment of sexuality in the West in terms of phenomenon exclusive to the elite segments of society. He admitted as much. In describing the injunction to confess, which he identified in sexual discourse beginning in the 17th century, Foucault said ‘it would seem in actual fact that it could scarcely have applied to any but a tiny elite; the great majority of the faithful… [who] only went to confession on rare occasions in the course of the year escaped such complex subscriptions’ (1990: 21). And this was not merely true of the original injunction to confess, but of the other techniques that developed in the deployment of sexual discourse from religion into other realms. Psychiatry is one post-Christian confessional practice typically concentrated among the elite, but there were others. Foucault noted, ‘the most rigorous techniques were formed and, more particularly, applied first, with the greatest intensity, in the economically privileged and politically dominant classes’.

Later these practices would be ‘widely disseminated, after a fashion; but this was at the cost of a considerable simplification’ (1990: 120). This dissemination did not occur without obstacles. Foucault explained that the deployment of sexuality that
had gained currency among the bourgeoisie was something that ‘the proletariat long refused to accept since it was foisted on them for the purpose of subjugation’. This refusal did not merely delay the inevitable, but caused mutations as well, since ‘one has to admit that this deployment does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to the social classes, and consequently, that it does not produce the same effects in them’ (1990: 127).

**Pornography and class effects**

So, if it is the case that, as Foucault puts it, ‘sexuality is originally, historically bourgeois, and that in its successive shifts and transpositions, it induces specific class effects’ (1990: 127), then it is possible that MacKinnon, despite her frequent claims to universalism, is describing one of those class effects. If the working class were resistant to bourgeois sexuality, and if different mutations on that bourgeois sexuality had differing levels of success, could we not then read some significance into the mutation that eventually took the strongest hold? If that were the case than we would expect, first of all, that it would bear some family resemblance to the bourgeois sexuality from which it mutated. I have indicated that MacKinnon’s analysis of mainstream heterosexual pornography is in accord with some of Foucault’s ideas about the deployment of sexuality. There are other similarities as well. For example, in describing the hysteria among bourgeois women, Foucault explained that

‘sex’ was defined in three ways: as that which belongs in common to men and women; as that which belongs, *par excellence*, to men, and hence is lacking in women; but at the same time, as that which by itself constitutes woman’s body, ordering it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction and keeping it in constant agitation through the effects of that very function. (1990: 153)

These ways of thinking of sexuality’s different place in the lives of men and women is entirely in keeping with MacKinnon’s analysis of contemporary sexuality. In these terms, MacKinnon’s analysis of mainstream understandings of sexuality suggests that while the (heterosexual) man believes he is the master of sexuality, he believes the woman is defined by it. Since she fears the very thing that is so central to her being – that threatens to overwhelm her – it is up to the man to guide her through the process of self-realization. Like the authority in a confession, it requires questioning and encouragement, and sometimes force. But in the end it allows the confessor, or in this case the woman, to reveal the truth about herself.

If pornography, and the understanding of sexuality that it supports, is an especially successful mutation in the deployment of sexuality as it disseminated from the religious and economic elite through the rest of society, there should be some aspect of that mutation that enhanced its chances of survival amid other mutations. MacKinnon suggests that the particular deployment of sexuality represented in pornography has succeeded thanks to the heroic role it assigns to men. Men are
incorporated in this discourse by virtue of their being given a special status and inherent authority. This incorporation is accomplished in part though the messages conveyed by pornography as a none-too-subtle *ars erotica*. And while pornography is not the monolith that MacKinnon makes it out to be, feminine repression and the masculine task of overcoming it is certainly one of its most common themes.

This puts the men whose sexual identities are wrapped up in the mainstream pornographic discourse instead of say, psychiatric discourse, in a very different position. They begin to resemble, in their own self-explanation, the ‘master’ featured in the Eastern *ars erotica* that Foucault describes:

‘the relationship [of the apprentice] to the master who holds the secrets is of paramount importance; only he, working alone, can transmit this art in an esoteric manner and as the culmination of an initiation in which he guides the disciple’s progress with unfailing skill and severity. The effects of this masterful art…are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges: an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death, and its threats. (1990: 58)

MacKinnon’s characterization of male sexuality in our culture is not very different from this. The skills are perhaps less intricate, but the severity and the supposed transcendence remain.

One lesson to be learned from this application of Foucault to MacKinnon is that we need not consider sexuality as a monolithic and oppressive whole (as MacKinnon seems to) in order to learn from her analysis. Taking account of the ways that sexual discourse, from its origins in religion, has changed meanings, been hidden and talked about, diversified and remained diverse, does not take away from the profound implications of what MacKinnon observes about a certain form of contemporary sexual discourse. In fact, taking into account the historical context of the sexualities we wish to understand offers a theoretical leverage we would not otherwise have to understand a particular, but quite prevalent, sexual discourse that is most clearly reflected in mainstream heterosexual pornography. In other words, we can learn from MacKinnon’s analysis within a less stifling, and ultimately more informative paradigm – one that calls attention to the religious origins of the meanings we give to modern sexuality.

**Pornography and religious ritual**

In calling attention to the commonalities and interdependence of sexual and religious meaning, Foucault’s analysis suggests a few further steps we might take in coming to grips with the sort of sexual meaning that preoccupies MacKinnon. What is necessary is a convincing account of the mechanisms by which pornography might help men believe that they truly are called to a heroic role of the ‘sexual liberator’ and ‘master’ who initiates women into a knowledge of the ‘truth’ about their sexuality. MacKinnon provides a number of examples of ways in which the
conception of women to be found in a particular strain of mainstream pornography manifests itself at the level of the state. What is not clear is just how pornography might help construct this sexual identification in people’s everyday lives. I will suggest two perspectives, building upon the relationship that Foucault develops between religious and sexual meaning, which might operate within MacKinnon’s paradigm and are well suited to situating the function of pornography within the structure of male domination. These perspectives take advantage of the analyses of religious rituals and sacred language offered by Bourdieu and Anderson.

In his study of the religious origins of modern asceticism Nietzsche wrote “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory” – this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth’ (1967: 61). This is certainly the case for creating the memory of who one is, particularly when this identity involves a responsibility for young men to dominate women. Bourdieu argued that among the people of Kabylia, male domination is continually reconstructed, reinforced, and passed on to new members of the society through a series of religious rituals. Occurring at a deeper level than the realm of ideas, these rituals inscribe the norms of male domination onto the bodies of the young men involved (Bourdieu, 1996). The rituals place men into positions of physical danger or pain, and symbolize a meaningful separation from the rest of the community. Through markings, as well as memories of the pain involved, they have the masculine capacity to dominate etched onto their bodies and thus intimately wrapped up in their identities. These rituals, claims Bourdieu, constitute the concrete social construction of male domination, which is viscerally inscribed in the passions and identities of the people of Kabylia.

But Nietzsche was only half right. Deep lessons can substitute pleasure for pain, or intermingle the two. Freud believed it is both terror of castration and the hoped for pleasure of connection with the mother that drives the early identity formation of boys (Freud, 1989). In a culture where most things are experienced through some intervening media, pain and pleasure’s indirect corollaries, terror and titillation, play an important role as well. Chris Nealon describes the role of ‘physical culture’ magazines in the formation of a gay male identity in the 1950s (Nealon, 2001). The introduction of mass-produced magazines that placed the male body on display, available at any drug store, allowed the formation of an imagined gay community that had not existed before, and paved the way for political breakthroughs in the 1960s. These magazines outsold by hundredfolds the magazines devoted to gay culture that involved more discussion of politics and less titillation. According to Nealon, the potential for a mass gay identification already existed, but it took a little sex to fuel the fire.

Pornography can be seen as playing a similar role to rituals of masculine domination as described by Bourdieu, but making use of pleasure instead of pain. MacKinnon claims:

Pornography conditions male orgasm to female subordination. It tells men what sex means, what a real woman is, and codes them together in such a way that is
behaviorally reinforcing . . . Substantively, pornography defines the meaning of what a woman is seen to be by connecting access to her sexuality with masculinity through orgasm. (1987: 190)

The early consumption of pornography might help accomplish what the rituals described by Bourdieu do elsewhere. But if pornography inscribes male domination onto the orgasmic passions of boys and men, it does so not only in reference to the male body, but by defining female sexuality and making that definition something to believe in. It is again useful to refer to Nealon. Physical culture magazines were rife with realist depictions of far away scenes of quasi-erotic male bonding: cowboys in the west, drying their clothes after a storm; Greek men wrestling in the ancient polis; and so on. Nealon describes one artist whose work appeared in the physical culture magazines insisting upon the reality of these depictions – he was certain that the scenes he was conjuring in his head and putting on paper had really occurred. An avid reader of physical culture magazines in his youth, the artist describes the desperation with which he clung to the belief that there were actual places where it was okay for men to be intimate. He devoted his life to creating those scenes.

The sort of pornography that interests MacKinnon, if it is confronted with a similar earnestness, defines a world in which it is okay for men to dominate women and in doing so liberate women to enjoy their sexuality. This belief could be quite plausible to the young man looking around the popular images of contemporary culture. There is no need to imagine oneself in ancient Greece or the old west. Nonetheless, these young men influenced by pornography in the development of their sexual self-understanding might devote themselves to recreating scenes in their own lives in which men sexually dominate women. The ceremonies of the Kabylia may more directly reflect Durkheim’s insight that the experience of the religious is a social experience that reinforces the power of the community (Durkheim, 2001). But the ‘private’ experience of pornography, whether in physical culture magazines or contemporary internet sites, inscribes certain notions of community, and gender roles within it, on the bodies and deep emotions of those who encounter them. The experience of heightened emotion and excitation that Durkheim associated with religious communal gatherings is achieved, perhaps in private, through the mediation of pornography.

**Pornography as sacred language**

Religious communities are often united by sacred languages, and pornography can be understood in this context as well. The relationship that people have to pornography is not simply physically moving, it is also symbolically moving – something it has in common with the sacred languages of the past. For the majority of recorded history, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, sacred languages and iconography were thought to provide sole access to religious truth and meaning (Anderson, 1991). These languages, Latin being the most familiar in the West, were
qualitatively different from vernacular languages. Understood by a select few and almost entirely unspoken, sacred languages held together great religious communities more expansive than any nation. The vast Buddhist world, the Islamic world, and Christendom cohered for century after century in thoroughly diverse social structures, incorporating rich and poor, illiterate and literate and vernacular upon vernacular. Anderson explains: ‘Take only the example of Islam: if Maguindanao met Berbers in Mecca, knowing nothing of each other’s languages, incapable of communicating orally, they nonetheless understood each other’s ideographs, because the sacred texts they shared existed only in classical Arabic… The medium of a sacred language linked [their sacral community] to a superterrestrial order of power’ (Anderson, 1991: 13).

To relate this to pornography, recall its obsession with authenticity and the reality of what it depicts. Anderson explains, ‘the sacred silent languages were the media through which the great global communities of the past were imagined, the reality of such apparitions depended on… the non-arbitrariness of the sign… The ideograms of Chinese, Latin, or Arabic were emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it’ (1991: 14). Modern pornography can operate in an analogous way. For the community united by a certain understanding of male domination based on sexuality, pornography offers unique access to ‘the truth’ about women. And that truth assigns men a heroic role in relation to women, as surely as religious truth assigned medieval man a task in life.

Consider the parallels between the pre-Vatican II Catholic mass and the modern strip-club. In the old Catholic mass, the priests on the alter performed in elaborate dress an unchanging ritual in a language so unfamiliar to the audience that it took on the aura of chanting. This weekly ceremony was the sole access to sacred truth and the higher order for the silent community in the pews. It bound them together with Catholics the world over who watched the same ritual in the same mysterious language. In the strip club, men sit before the elaborately dressed (and undressed) performers, who communicate with them through ritualized movements and language. Members of the congregation each get a moment of personal attention from the performer as she circles the stage. It is a communion they receive personally, but it is open to all members of the community as they make their offerings.

The pornography described by MacKinnon, like other sacred languages, can continually bring more men into the fold. For sacred languages, ‘as truth-languages, [are] imbued with… the impulse towards conversion. By conversion, I mean not so much the acceptance of particular religious tenets, but alchemic absorption… The whole nature of man’s being is sacrally malleable’ (Anderson, 1991: 15). Notable from this perspective is pornography’s international scope, anticipated by the enormous geographical range of the ancient religious communities. American men who have no use for Asian or European high culture consume Asian and European pornography (Paul, 2005: 13). Adorno noted the extent to which sexual meaning, when experienced through pornography, could overcome boundaries of language and nation and unlock ‘repressed’ meaning.
How closely sex and language are intermingled becomes apparent when reading pornography in another language. No dictionary is needed to read Sade in the original. Even the most refined expressions for that which is indecent…are understood intuitively…It is as if the imprisoned passions explode, upon being called by these names, blind words like the wall of one's own repression, striking violently and irresistibly into the innermost cell of meaning, which it itself resembles. (Adorno, 1978: 27)

While Adorno imagined repressed sexuality, Foucault’s work revealed instead a proliferation of sexual discourse.

But if MacKinnon is right, it is women’s repression, and the techniques of overcoming it, that is the most frequent subject of heterosexual pornographic sexual discourse. This puts the religious nature of contemporary sexual meaning in a different context. Here men are called upon to take on the masterly aspects of *ars erotica*, the eliciting of a confession. Durkheim noted the contagiousness of the sacred, that it is passed on through physical contact. He also noted the sacred’s ambiguity: that it is often experienced as a sudden transformation from dysphoria to ecstasy (Durkheim, 2001). William James noted that the experience of conversion involves a decision to sacrifice the self – abandon notions of who we are – in times of duress (James, 1961). These aspects of the sacred are recreated in pornography’s depiction of women, sexually liberated, and experiencing the ecstatic through the physical persuasion of insistent men.

**Conclusion: The pornographic and the sacred community**

Paul Kahn suggests that we cannot understand the power of pornography in our culture unless we understand the importance of the ‘remnants of the Christian confessional community that have become part of our secular political tradition’ – in particular in the persisting notion that the ‘paradigmatic political act is sacrifice’ (Kahn, 2005a: 164, 182). Kahn figures the pornographic as an ecstatic escape from the burdens of community and the responsibility of passing on the traditions of a polity united by a religious sense of love and responsibility. The pornographic, he suggests, claims the body for the self and the now against religious and political claims on the body for the community, the legacy of the past, and the future. Pornography, Kahn suggests, offers a ‘radical claim to freedom’ that ‘produces no discourse’ and ‘creates no community’ (Kahn, 2005a: 204). In pornography, he suggests, ‘women must appear as equals, engaged in the same self-discovery as man’ (Kahn, 2005a: 209).

But the foregoing exploration of MacKinnon and Foucault suggests that the pornographic might offer more continuity with the religious aspects of our culture than a respite from it. It is a discourse with a great deal in common with the religious confessional discourses Foucault identified as central to the development of modern western polities. It reinforces notions of community in ways that justify hierarchy rather than equality. Kahn has suggested, ‘in the modern age, the erotic
provides us with the ecstatic moment shorn of religion. It stands in the anti-political tradition of the sacred... We should not be surprised that as the possibilities of religious transcendence diminish, the pornographic moment becomes the locus of an antistatist vision of freedom’ (Kahn 2005b). But the institutional church, as Foucault suggests, has long confronted the erotic and the ecstatic and sought to fold them into a confessional discourse that reinforced established hierarchies. The churches continue, with mixed success, to seek ways to incorporate the experience of sexuality into religious doctrine and religious belief (Kintz, 1997; Connolly, 2008). Today, as MacKinnon suggests, the ecstatic moment of self-realization suggested by pornography comes embedded in a discourse which helps to determine and legitimize established relationships of authority and power. Sexual meaning has long been intertwined with religious meaning in the West, so to understand the significance of pornography in our culture we should attend to its resonance with our religious traditions and the persistent power of confessional discourse and notions of the sacred.

Notes
1. As Frank Rich described it in The New York Times Magazine in 2001: ‘pornography is a bigger business than professional football, basketball and baseball put together. People pay more money for pornography in America in a year than they do on movie tickets, more than they do on all the performing arts combined’. This way of assessing porn’s prominence ignores the fact that most pornography is now consumed online and for free (Paul, 2005: 12–15).
2. Romance novels might also be included among these less learned sexual texts. MacKinnon has suggested that most romance novels depict a sexual dynamic between men and women similar to pornography. Alan Soble comes to the same conclusion in his book Pornography (1986), as does Paul Kahn in Putting Liberalism in its Place (2005a).
3. This is an aspect of pornography that has only become more prominent in the last decade, when much pornography has adapted a documentary style (Rich, 2001; Paul, 2005).
4. Other scholars have defended the continued relevance of the Christian origins of the American polity, notably Wolfe (2009) and Stark (2005). Kahn is unique in using this perspective to examine the cultural significance of pornography.

References


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