FUTURESEX/LOVESOUNDS: Queer Noise and The Sonic Textures of Pornographic Representation

by

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(Thank-you to Justin Timberlake’s award-winning 2006 album.)

Thank-you Thank-you Thank-you
Thank-you
A NOTE IN EXCESS OF A NOTE ON TITLE

The title for this piece comes from Justin Timberlake’s 2006 album, FUTURESEX/LOVESOUNDS. I love Justin Timberlake. Pop music feels right at home with my personal and academic attachments. Justin Timberlake might even be Camp, or at least I’d like to read him as such—gel-cemented hair, electric falsetto, boundless longing and all. I’d also like to sneak some of Timberlake’s language into this project in the interests of queer futurity as it co-mingles with sexual-sonic practices. (What a better title for a paper about sound than something meant for music?) Personally, I fantasize and experience ‘the future’ through new formulations of relationality. What exists Right Now, through the terminology of “normative frameworks,” is not working. “Common Sense” is not working. I care about queer relationality, queered sexual and kinship frameworks, and, here, an intentional approach to pornography and to listening (and to the two of them together!). Sex is here defined broadly as physical acts practiced and unpracticed, modes of sexual relationality, whatever they “look” like. When I relate differently I experience myself differently, I experience others differently. The relational modes that come out of these practices provide a glimpse/glitch/hint of what exists in excess of What We’ve All Been Forced Into (institutionalized gender, family ties and re-productive temporalities, domination of The State over all areas of life, the colonial & capitalist histories these structures sprout from. What else?). Without postulating that all queer-ed modes are helpful (or even non-violent), I would argue that renewed approaches with regards to bodily determination, familial structuring, gender & sexual performance (among others), feel political, utopian, and reparative. These can be touching/feeling/gesturing, they can be listening. LoveSounds can be PornSounds can be FutureSex can be NowSex can be ?
Figure 1. Tee Vee Dinner. *Queen Bee Empire*, 2014.
Like a burnt-out match!
Like sex without the body!
Like smoke rings from my pussy!

*A night vision; bodies turned soft like newborn jellyfish*
*Mushrooms light MacBooks, blind bodies with empty sockets*
*I stare back at my gaze that belongs to your body*

*I ask "is there nothing but seen or seen*
*Is there nothing serve nothing*
*Is there nothing and nothing?*

In the dim light, my hearing became more acute. The open factory brimmed with echoes. Waves of sound could persist and resonate between the walls, filling out the silence until other noises took over. When Carral zipped up her jacket and tied her shoelaces that morning, I could hear faint traces of her earlier activity: vague sonic contours of shower and toothbrush, yawning and chewing. When she left for the big Sachs & Sachs building where she worked, the shattering sound of the front door shutting was thousands of tiny marbles rolling through the house. I turned to the window to see her walk to the tram stop. There was no one else on the road. The broken windows of the building abutting the silos glittered in the sun.

“In a house with no walls, shared with a woman who has no boundaries,” the narrator of Jenny Hval’s novel *Paradise Rot* finds herself consumed by sounds of intimacy: apple skins rubbing up against one another in the cupboards in the morning, apple juice leaking down her roommate, Carral’s, chin, mixing with her spit to form an indefinite mixture of saliva and pink-ish, yellow-y liquid, the soft thuds of Carral’s

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1 Jenny Hval, *Innocence is Kinky* (Norway, Rune Grammofon).
3 Ibid, frontcover synopsis.
sleepwalking feet across the floorboards and the milky trickling\(^4\) of her pee hitting a porcelain toilet bowl, the soft brushing of an ever-growing skin-like fungus against the bathtub in gestures too minute to be seen in real-time. The paper-thin walls of the renovated factory where she has taken up residence during a period studying abroad end abruptly above the floorboards, connecting the rooms together against their will. The sounds that flow between these gaps have lives of their own. They encircle those they encounter as they stretch outwards across space.

The decomposition of physical barriers enacts a collapsing of space that shifts Jo’s perception of movement through her home, elucidating the physical registers of the sonic acts that suddenly surround her. A parallel arises between her heightened experience of sensorial\(^5\) closeness and the physical and sensorial magnification of proximity that occurs during sex, among other things. In the house, silence is not an absence of sound so much as a differently formulated physical state. It is an empty hole to be filled up with sound waves, having the capacity to wait, in time, to be evacuated by noisier replacements. Sound and silence develop through physical swells that eventually bubble over, persistent and vague presences that nonetheless affect one another as they carve out the space of Jo and Carral’s shared home. In the wake of the disintegration of personal spaces, Jo gains a heightened sensitivity to the

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\(^4\) Ibid. “In the middle of the night I heard May on the phone in the hallway, the sounds of her alien language bubbling as if they came out of and into her mouth at the same time. Half asleep, the words as lines of knives and spoons. After she hung up, I heard her feet shuffle into her bathroom. There she pulled down her trousers and sat on the toilet seat. Urine streamed against the porcelain bowl. In the darkness I thought it sounded a little thick, as if warm milk was trickling out of her.” 11.

\(^5\) Throughout this piece, “sensorial” refers to experiences of feeling (related to the senses, although not necessarily just the commonly discussed five) that exist outside of vision when defined as strictly isolated phenomena. Sensorial experiences can certainly refer to visual stimulus; however I would like to separate “hegemonic” modes of viewing, i.e. ways of looking that separate “the eye” from the rest of the body and are thus body-less and space-less, from modes of viewership that are situated, which will come up later in my analysis of Donna Haraway.
shifting waves of feeling accompanying the sounds and images lingering in her surroundings. The noises of daily life become physical traces moving through the haunted/ing apartment, "thousands of tiny marbles rolling through the house." These gestures illuminate the faint movements of a toothbrush with similar linguistic valences to the elucidation of the contours of a lover’s silhouette, touching in ways that exceed most day-to-day physical interactions.

In examining sound in pornography, particularly with queer sonic performances in mind, I found myself repeatedly coming back to Jenny Hval’s writing and Jo and Carral’s experiences of each other’s bodies as I questioned the sonic entanglements of sex and its representations. The novel’s plot spills out in waves as the two form a relationship within the confines of their strange living situation. Jo is a biology student studying away from home and becomes, over time, subsumed into Carral’s domestic and imaginary worlds. Within these worlds, the lines between “bodies and plants,” waking and dream states, touch and imagination, begin to blur. The house fills with rotten apples and blooming fungus, Carral intermittently has catatonic, dream-like, episodes while leafing through the pages of her erotic novel, and the two roommates share various moments of intimate and sexual touch that are never spoken about or confirmed afterwards.

Importantly, Jo and Carral’s relationship enacts queerness in a variety of ways, two of which are particularly noteworthy here. In the first, more traditional, sense, they experience lesbian desire in relationship to one another as two women engaged in an increasingly sexual-romantic interpersonal dynamic. Secondly, their interactions through each other’s sonic traces represent a type of sexual encounter that

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6 Ibid, frontcover synopsis.
queers heterosexual formulations of traditional sex acts by shifting normative frameworks of how bodies might exist in such a way as to engage each other intimately or sexually in the first place. Although Jo and Carral have few documented instances of physical sexual contact, the extension of their sensorial lives into each other’s personal spaces—through the registers of sound, smell, taste, and texture—enacts a queer boundary crossing. This, in turn, reformulates how they mutually engage by de-materializing (or re-materializing) the edges of their physical bodies.

Their re-embodiment is situated in particular relation to the natural world and its states of decay, whose bodily character Hval highlights in her language: molding fruit, rubbing apples, fungus, pee (is that not also a decaying fruit of a sort?). As Jo longs for Carral from afar while Carral sleepwalks into Jo’s bed and then out of it again each night, the ephemeral sites of their shared touch are amplified through the contact of the sounds produced through the intimate details of their shared domestic lives. Sound in the factory does and undoes Jo and Carral’s bodily forms, bringing them together queerly in a realm that disregards the usual requirements of linear and static embodiment. The sounds of Jo’s home surround her with the simultaneously unsettling and titillating question of ongoing and past bodily (human-bodily, plant-bodily) entanglements.

The sounds of sex illuminate normative expectations of public and private spaces, of relational dynamics, and of the assumed authenticity of both. Given this, in the broad realm of pornographic representation, sound might be read as enacting an ephemeral queer performance, undermining the arguments asserting that all porn does ‘the same thing,’ and reinscribing gender performance through artifice, multi-
locationality, and representational opacity. In other words, sound’s physical qualities that are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, and sound’s ability represent a variety of referents without providing certainty, trouble the “genre” of pornography by significantly shifting how pornographic works might be interpreted as multi-sensorial objects. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari's “rhizome” as a visualization of the multi-spatial and multi-temporal circulation of knowledge⁸ (as opposed to linear constructions of knowledge sharing that depict the flow of information as necessarily beginning and ending in discreet, related locations), sound waves pass through physical barriers at a variety of speeds and frequencies, haunting the physical spaces they encounter, encountering multiple sites of contact at once.⁹ (Here and throughout the rest paper, “haunting” refers simultaneously to a metaphysical ghostly presence and to Avery Gordon’s question, “What’s Haunting Sociology?¹⁰” alongside her imperative that “to study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it”¹¹). Deleuze and Guattari themselves note this comparison in regards to music in *A Thousand Plateaus*, noting the “lines of flight” sent out by music “like so many transformational multiplicities.”¹² Given the presence of these structures, the affective elements of sound effects, moans, and background noise in porn might be considered through the physical way in which they linger in the material (-representational) space of a porn set or other sites of viewership and physically engage those involved while remaining covert.

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⁷Here, I am referring to images, videos, and spaces that present representations of sex to varying degrees.
⁹ Nondestructive Testing Resource Center, "Reflection of Sound."
¹¹ Ibid, 7.
¹² Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*, 184.
“Noise” here refers to auditory data in excess of what is culturally inscribed as “sound,” such as ‘intrusive,” loud, unintelligible noises. The garbage truck zooming by your window in the early morning or the rumbling of your neighbor’s lawn mower while you attempt to watch a television program are noise. Noise also refers to unintentional background “noises” such as static, which intrude upon the comprehensibility of sounds that convey melody or narrative in music and video pieces. In some sense, “noise” refers to the sounds that most humans would shut out if they were able to selectively close their ears. I also refer to noise as a means of identifying the material qualities of sound that exist simultaneously in visual and sonic registers; noise refers to particular non-melodic, jarring, or unidentifiable sounds, but also to the static of analog media that gives clues into the material conditions of artistic production both in audio and visual quality. This term will also be discussed in more detail later in the text.

Within an aesthetic-cultural regime of hyper-fixation on visual representation and, specifically, visual representation with an interest in separating the apparatus of sight (site) from the body from which it originates (human, technological, or otherwise), the invisible materiality of sound waves physically disrupts pornographic representation from within. It spreads out within the representational field, providing feeling in excess of meaning. These waves are not testament to a hidden “depth” lost in visual representation. Rather, they are ephemeral evidence of the prevailing sensorial regime’s erasure of particular forms and formulations of meaning, as well as its inability to accomplish the task of full erasure. Sound waves have the ability to sneak past an imperative that information be forthcoming, legible, ‘visible’ in a particular register. It is imperative to focus on the noise structuring and invading
pornographic archives—in moans, slurps, slaps, and the static of degraded video footage—so as to engage the undercurrents of the genre’s existing tumultuousness, refusing to take the visual as a static or isolated force.

In this piece, I will address cultural objects with less explicit reference to sexual content or erotic formulations of the body, as well as engage both independently produced and mainstream pornographic works. I use the term “mainstream pornography” to describe pornographic materials circulated widely on the industry’s major viewing sites, in particular, Pornhub. This phrase also references a broad cultural supposition of “mainstream porn” that necessarily excludes indie pornography, queer porn, erotic cinema, and other more “high brow” manifestations of pornographic content as well as sex scenes in film, video games, and other media often not viewed as ‘explicit enough’ to qualify as pornographic content. Thus, this phrase is being used in two ways: firstly as a general phrase with a context-specific meaning I have outlined above (particularly because I will be engaging low-budget, independently produced “art” instances of pornographic representation at the piece’s conclusion), and secondly as a gesture towards a common monolithic understanding of the pornographic genre wherein porn is a “bad” (read: “low-class,” exploitative) alternative to other more culturally accepted modes of sexually explicit representation.

In other words, mainstream porn exists as both a subset of a broader industry and as a paradigm through which particular pornographic sites might be understood through the frameworks of universal female exploitation. I do not view mainstream porn as either universally perpetuative or devoid of violence, and I extend this mindset towards all instances of sexual representation; the categorization of these
objects as “good” or “bad” does not help to contend with their impact out in the world or the ways in which they might be critically dismantled or re-interpreted. Rather, I am interested in specifying the objects of my discussion and their formulation within a broader cultural imaginary so as to critically approach each instance with care and without repeating the sex-negative rhetorics that lump all porn together. Similarly, I am not interested in isolating “mainstream porn” so as to demonize it as a low-brow cultural object without questioning its social context and other cultural-object peers.

Moreover, I am not attempting here to offer sound as an indisputable, glorious, subaltern alternative to an overdetermined, superficial, and violent visual realm. Sound here does not represent a renewed investment in semiotic depth—on the contrary, it is helpful as a framework particularly for the ways in which it obscures traditional pathways to any type of legible meaning at all. These pathways largely revolve around classification: dissecting the meaning of objects or texts based off of where they come from and what or whom they represent. This being said, sound itself also often enacts the same violences as the visual. Through eavesdropping and wiretapping, sound can serve surveillance just as visual imagery can. Sound also risks aiding in the processes of social subjectification and violent misinterpretation through music and language. These bolster the interests of aesthetic determinism as well as violently enforced social hierarchies of race, gender, and ability, to name a few.

Johnson, “French Set Girls and Transcolonial Performance,” 142. Sara Johnson approaches this in her book The Fear of French Negroes, wherein she writes about the relationship between French-colonial slaves (as well as other enslaved people within a broader geographical scope) and the sonic realm: “It is critical to remember that slaves ‘lived in a world of sound; a world in which the spoken, chanted, sung, or shouted word was the primary form of communication’ (L. Levine 157). As noted in the epigraph that opened this chapter, ‘one culture’s knowledge’ can indeed be ‘another’s noise.’ An ability to distinguish between the two extremes is predicated on membership in a given community. While it is common to recall that white observers usually saw what they wanted to see (most often mindless beings that fit anywhere along a spectrum ranging from happy docile servants to barbarous hordes), it is also true that they heard what they wanted to hear. Put another way,
Instead of postulating sound as “the answer” to the “question” of visual-pornographic culture, I would like to ask what possibilities this alternative mode of reading/feeling opens up. This text operates under two main frameworks of curiosity: firstly, within the context of a “Hegemony of Optics,” what is the nature of sound and how is this sound related to queerness? Secondly, given this relationship, what elements of sound might inform a new approach to pornographic imagery that foregrounds seeking pleasure (rather than solely authentic representations) with receptivity, bottomhood, and other marginalized positionalities in mind? Formulated otherwise, what noises—along with other covert knowledges—are disrupting heterosexual and cisgender baselines in pornographic narratives precisely through the ways in which they elude narrativity? In what ways does sound undermine the assumption of a single pornographic narrative through its inevitable multiplicity, what is it doing in pornographic spaces, and how might these actions be considered as a means of rerouting a (the) representational fix to the “bad object” that is porn?

Instead of right-ing the wrongs of the perpetually wounding pornographic object through good, liberal representational politics, I would posit that acts of listening and counter-listening unravel the genre just as well as the solitary meaning it is purported to be creating. I call these acts an approach of ‘slutty listening,’ a means leaning into the ear’s openness, of listening to everything without asking everything: “What are you?,” “Who are you?,” “Why are you?” and expecting a singular, legible response. Even noise! I am drawn to sounds that are twinkly, inauthentic, and opaque. I would like to hide behind sound as well as discover something new through it,

*they did not hear what they were not trained to understand* (italics added). Hence, although many chroniclers noted the musical prowess of black musicians, just as frequently they complained of ‘backward,’ out-of-tune, or monotonous noise.”
whether that be a new method of looking(-feeling) or a new means of conceiving of the bounds of ‘the body’ within three dimensional space. This method might be receptive, like an open ear, mouth, vaginal cavity, or anus, and the body unclassifiable and expansive. Maybe, the sounds of a “fake” orgasm on loop, in ejaculatory spurts.
A “HEGEMONY OF OPTICS: VISUAL CULTURE AND THE POLITICAL STAKES OF DISEMBODIED GAZE

Figure 2, Fucking Machines, Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines, 2014.
Before turning to sound, I would first like to engage the sense often methodologically preceding it: sight. Within the context of Western imperialism and its cultural moves, sight is often forcefully given precedence over other senses as well as physically removed from their proximity. The erasure of an original point of vision and its distancing as a subject from the object it observes reflects a typically colonial anxiety about the proximity of “othered” bodies to systems of power and to whiteness. This distancing also surfaces by way of the broader geographic racialization of bodies, cemented through the iconography of maps. Within a cultural ‘hegemony of optics,’ sight has a structuring function over social relationships; it rescues the head from the body’s sensorial woes using a framework that conflates the body and its feelings with a racialized, feminized other, leaving gaze within the realm of the presumed-as-neutral enactment of white (cisgender, straight-aligned) maleness. This extends towards an uneven fixation on the role of eyesight, in particular, as well as towards the visual realm at large, in the production of viable knowledge, or “truth.” In this sense, the stakes of this particular type of vision are those of a hegemonic politic—one with a vested interest in the hierarchical structuring of the senses, strengthened by a Cartesian split between mind and body. Although vision has historically been pushed into alignment with objectivity and distance, it is not the case that these are absolute characteristics of its function. Along these lines, my interest in sound’s physical qualities—in the characteristics of sound waves, the openness of the ear cavity—is leveraged here as a response to prevailing sensorial regimes that have taken ahold of vision, rather than to vision itself.
In this section, I will move through a series of thinkers who address vision and visuality. Ultimately, I aim to critique vision not through its biological functions, but rather through the ways in which it has been culturally constructed as a superlative form of self formation, communication, and practical or scientific observation. I will also engage some of the ways in which this formation of vision leads to its own undoing, in which it is unstable and porous. This approach is a response to what Jonathan Sterne terms “the audiovisual litany”\(^{14}\) in sound studies, a series of prevailing descriptive approaches to sight and sound that present the two senses as diametrically opposed. Sound in this dichotomy is an idealized means of accessing pure interiority, subjectivity, and emotionality. Because of its physical characteristics, sound is universally \textit{not} vision, it is \textit{not} oppressive, it is \textit{not} superficial. Sound is the subaltern answer to the problem of sight and of the dreaded flatness it produces. Sterne provides a set of oppositional phrases characteristic of this paradigm, including the following:

— hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; (…)
— hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces; (…)
— hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity;
— hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us towards atrophy and death; (…)
— hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect (…)\(^{15}\)

A particularly troublesome characteristic of the audiovisual litany is its naturalization of the qualities historically ascribed to sight and sound. The theoretical traditions that co-produce the audiovisual litany claim to “know” sight and sound solely on account of the basis of their physical and abstract functions. In doing so, they instill

legitimacy—through a type of biological determinism—into the feminization of sound against vision’s essential masculinity. Within the dichotomies represented in this list, hearing is attributed to positions of depth, interiority, emotionality, and mutability, whereas vision is poreless and rigid. This approach to a critique of vision takes seriously its mobilization as a masculinized form of knowing and immediately sets sound as an appropriate response rather than questioning the basis for these classifications in order to undo or repurpose them. While taking seriously the masculinization of particular forms of sight, I would like to destabilize the transhistoricity of the audiovisual litany by specifically situating the types of sight I talk about when I talk about sound. The “hegemony of optics” is a means of contextualizing a critique of visuality through its historic conflation with authenticity, objectivity, and perpetual distance from its subjects of interest.

My first look into the “hegemony of optics” and the visual structuring of social reality is through Lacanian psychoanalysis. This visual structuring exists as a foundational concept for Lacan in formations of selfhood, which rely on visual recognition and the failures thereof to constitute a narrative of subject formation, particularly in its early stages. Through his framework of “the mirror stage,” Lacan situates an individual’s sight as critically separate from other bodily functions and even from the body itself. In her work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (often attributed as the origin of “the male gaze” as a feminist concept and rhetoric), Laura Mulvey invokes Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach to early childhood self formation and recognition. Lacan locates this moment in the mirror, in the visual recognition of a self-outside-one’s-self. Perhaps more notably, this moment of

ocular recognition is a foundational moment of socialization, the moment of the subject’s looking back at itself as it looks at itself. This moment is foundational because it marks the subject’s recognition of itself as an object in the world, and it is through this recognition that the subject is able to relate to others and to the world around it. This moment is also foundational because it marks the subject’s separation from the body, as it looks at itself as a separate object in the world. This separation is necessary for the subject to be able to relate to others and to the world around it, and it is through this separation that the subject is able to construct a sense of selfhood.

15 Ibid.
reflection is capitulated as existing outside of the realm of physical sensation and is pointedly fixated on the surface of the image and the eyes that recognize it as a self. Mulvey writes of Lacan’s interpretation that “the mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body.”\textsuperscript{16} In this context, vision becomes a fix for an incomplete body, a repository for ambition and self-making. It jumps ahead of the temporal destiny of the sensorial body, working alone to engage a network of selves fostered through visual representation and recognition.

Mulvey locates misrecognition in this early act of self formation predicated on an alignment of oneself with one’s own visual image. She writes that “the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. This mirror-moment predates language for the child” (60). Although the image is still an anchoring site, it is essentially unreliable, “[constituting] the matrix of the imaginary.”\textsuperscript{17} Vision here is a series of mis-matched reflections, attempts at connection that falter in the presence of an ego wanting to see something \textit{in particular} and, in turn, producing that particular thing. In this sense, the visual also has the potential to be a site of fabulation and creativity. Still, although vision is not necessarily a reliable source of “truth” in this context, it is an independent catalyst for mental evolution in a way that Lacan does not afford to motor functions, linguistic

\textsuperscript{16} Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 60.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 61.
ability, or listening practices. In this sense, Lacan’s attachment to visuality in “the mirror stage” relies upon an understanding of vision as a uniquely cognitive sense with the productive capacity to spur development that lacks in what he terms “motor functions.”

In a broader context, vision is also historically situated in relationship to the production of authenticity and, on an even larger scale, reality. In this sense, the “hegemony of optics” refers not only to a hegemony of the senses (i.e. vision over motor functions and ‘experiences of the body’) but to a hegemony wherein images serve as a form of social control. In his lecture The Violence of The Image18 (which, in other iterations, is also titled “The Violence of The Image, the Violence Done to The Image), Jean Baudrillard reads the ubiquity of visual culture and mass image circulation as a type of violence in and of (and unto) itself, reading the site of the image as a site of disappearance rather than production. He fixates on this phenomena within a socio-cultural milieu defined through an increased presence of digital technology and, more specifically, image-sharing media. By purporting to give life to ‘The Real,’ images hide a different reality from view. This type of “misrecognition” extends Lacan and Mulvey’s assessment of the image as a mis-match of the self to the realm of reality as a whole. Lacan’s psychoanalytic ‘child’ misperceives themself in the mirror and in doing so begins to develop their ego based off of a central, although faulty, site of visuality. Somewhat similarly, Baudrillard’s “society” misperceives digital images as “reality” and self-formulates around this assessment, falling into the “hyperreality” of the image’s simulation.

Visual culture for Baudrillard ties to scenes of surveillance and the mandate for social subjects to be fully legible, knowable, communicable at all times—because visual technologies allow it to be so. He describes this violence in relationship to certain types of physical violence, presenting it as “more radical and subtle: the violence of deterrence, of consensus and control, of hyperregulation and deregulation altogether—the violence of the virtual, a metaviolence in some way. Violence of forced consensus and interaction, which are like the plastic surgery of the social.” The language of plastic surgery references a physical breach—just as the plastic surgeon alters existing skin with their scalpel and silicone. This breach is framed through the terms of improvement rather than destruction, but nonetheless performs a violence of a sort through the terminology of “uncovering” something “more” beneath the skin. The post-surgery body is purported to be “closer” to the pre-surgery “soul,” the patient’s most authentic self. The scalpel cuts into physical flesh to further align it with an immaterial, but nevertheless authentic and stable, selfhood that is portrayed as a necessary element of social interaction (“forced consensus and interaction”). By this token, Baudrillard sees the “murder” of and by the image as occurring through the oversignification of visual information, the expectation that the images we surround ourselves with will provide a 1:1 depiction of ‘the only reality that is or could ever be,’ which rests at the core of representation. Not only does the

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19 Ibid, np.
20 I would caution the use of plastic surgery as evidence of a social over-fixation on “surface value.” I would like to highlight a significant difference between the ways plastic surgery is used—for example, in the context of gender affirming surgeries, which I would not characterize as a violence (although the social functions that prescribe these methods as in any way ‘necessary’ for all trans people to survive or to be ‘correctly trans’ certainly are) — and how it is personified to a consumer market. I do not wish to critique plastic surgery for its investment in physical appearance. Rather, it is critique-able here because of its assertion that every person’s appearance be in constant consensus with their “most authentic self,” that visual performances must line-up inside-to-out in order for an effective social enmeshing to occur.
image do a violence to the outside world that imbues it with an excess of universal meaning, but it does a violence onto itself by purporting to enact too much.

Importantly, this dynamic within visual representation is not absolute. There are a variety of archives within which the simulatory effects of visual culture are problematized through critical counter-strategies and aesthetic interventions\textsuperscript{21}. Jennifer Nash identifies the visual as a repeated point of departure for black feminist theoretical work, arguing that what she sets up as the “black feminist archive” has a history of using visual media to anchor the present in the past and to stage “a larger critique of dominant visual culture that emphasizes representation as a practice that references and reenacts historical traumas.”\textsuperscript{22} She introduces Renée Cox’s photowork “Hot-En-Tot” to exemplify black feminist uses of visual representation to stage social critiques. In the image, Cox dons the figure of Saartjie Baartman, otherwise known as the “Hot-En-Tot Venus.” Images of Baartman’s body and, in particular, her protruding breasts and butt, were widely circulated on account of the ways in which it was perceived as portraying an ‘exotic’ excess. Cox puts wooden plates on her own body to extend its protrusions, echoing the depiction of Baartman’s silhouette in so many photographs, cartoons, and diagrams. The plates are tied together with twine that digs into her skin, emphasizing the boundaries between her body and the materials that extend it outwards. Baartman’s figure, often emblematized as an object of scientific fascination, is reinterpreted through Cox’s decision to stare directly at the camera, suggesting the inevitable, if not equitable, reciprocality of representation that

\textsuperscript{21} I use the word “interventions” here tepidly, recognizing relegation of black feminist and queer of color critiques to the perpetual role of “intervention” upon dominant, white, social movements as a means of minimizing the expansive temporalities of their analytic strategies and resistive modes. Here, intervention specifically speaks to works that intentionally engage in conversation with existing materials in order to form a critique, often through strategies of reproduction, assemblage, and remixing.
is often left out of discussions of racist iconography. In other words, Cox reminds her viewers of the subject’s ability to “gaze back.” In doing so, she significantly problematizes the conception of representation as a static field.

Cox’s returned gaze represents an eye grounded in its own subjectivity. Rather than tacitly receive the dissecting, scientific, gaze of an onlooker, Cox questions the ultimate authority of the image’s viewer by introducing a new type of vision. In addition to Baudrillard’s critique of “The Image”’s tendency to simulate reality, another important historical danger the visual is its ability to simulate authority by distancing itself from its subjects. This occurs in photography (and, in particular, ethnographic or scientific photography) through the frequent naturalization of the camera’s gaze on its subjects. Cox calls attention to this dynamic by staring back at the camera (and, by extension, the eye it signifies), thus implicating the existence of the eye that had been staring at her in the first place under the auspices of a universalized camera lens.

Donna Haraway furthers this critique of the eye of hegemonic spectatorship in her piece “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” Akin to Baudrillard, Haraway identifies the stakes of gaze within an increasingly technological milieu. She observes the increased presence of a digital vision in excess of already fraught analog approaches to sight. Digital vision, in this case, operates largely through governmental apparati of surveillance and militarization: drone cameras, CCTV monitors, body scanners at the airport with the ability to extract extensive bioinformation from passengers in a matter of seconds. By turning to a broad rift within feminist discourses—that between “feminism” and

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“objectivity” (and, by extension, an academic rift between the “hard” and “soft” sciences)-- Haraway locates the act of vision within its historical employment in the construction of truth. She acknowledges the necessity of feminist practices to embrace the sciences and to attenuate their reliance on constructivist claims, which portray all science as trickery—a rhetorical weapon.

Rather than directly focusing on the image produced by vision practices, Haraway engages what is purported to be the point of origin of these images: the eye (notably, not “the body”). Haraway asserts that historically “the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honored to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.” This distancing is evident in the positioning of omnipresent surveillance cameras that perpetually watch passers-by from unknowable heights. Another example might be Foucault’s panopticon, through which vision becomes a mode of collective policing. Constantly anticipating gaze from all angles but never quite sure of the whereabouts of the individual(s) gazing at them, prisoners within the panopticon—and this is also to say, individuals within civil society—are threatened towards normative, law-abiding behaviors through the symbolism of a set of eyes that looks but resists location itself. Similar to Foucault, Haraway connects this visual social subjugation with sexual subjugation, anthropomorphizing the hegemonic techno-eye through its ravenous sexual practices. She writes that

Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all seems not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything

23 Haraway, Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, 581.
from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters. The eye that fucks the world wants and needs to see everything, to consume everyone it sees, to name them with definite power as a greek god might his children. All the while, remaining hidden from sight. All the while, keeping the information (as if it were telling of any capital-T “Truth”) stored in maximum security vaults, encoded and tucked away for further usage. Vision of this variety is only truly accessible to those who have the ability to fully disguise themselves from the leering eyes of others, and increasingly this ability is inscribed through the selective dispersal of military technologies.

To varying degrees, Haraway and Nash stick to the realm of vision as an apparatus of re-working its powerful capacities. Each theorist engages the visual differently, and each works to shift its position as a bludgeoning force. Particularly in the case of black feminist encounters with visual representation, sensationalist visual sites provide the materials for pointed reformulations of harmful portrayals of black womanhood. Rather than reject the tools of representation, the artists Nash discusses utilize their porosity as a means of problematizing the relationship between visual representation and authenticity. For Haraway, the stakes of a renewed interest in the visual are also high. She is not only concerned with the form taken by “objectivity,” but also in the potential for a rewriting of “the body” as a whole. She writes:

I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates. We need to learn in our bodies, endowed

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24 Ibid, 581.
with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. “

(582)

Along these lines, my address of the “hegemony of the visual,” this phrase floating around cultural studies and its peers, is not a call to multi-dimensionalize flimsy visual representations through sound as a means of remedying their flatness. Haraway’s embodied vision need not be any more connected to interiority or subjectivity, two qualities associated with depth and authenticity, than the current state of the visual. Rather, it should be cognisant that it comes from somewhere, that looking has stakes and directionality, and that these stakes are currently entwined with the cultivation of white supremacist techno-capitalism.

I am interested in the possibilities associated with leaning into the inability of visual and other representational media to “authentically” depict subjects or experiences and thus abandoning the investment in an authentic subject to begin with. I would like to expand this consideration of visual culture by problematizing “the visual” as an object in and of itself. How might one hold onto the distinct imagery of visual representation in order to circumvent the surveillance-oriented implications of what Baudrillard deems to be “the image”? In other words—is it potentially fruitful in the face of surveillance to utilize the parts of images that present themselves as “self evident” or “realistic” to avoid further prying? Might this be done through a-referential or multi-referential sounds—such as indeterminate static or the call of a whistle that takes a listener to any number of potential points of origin—and the opacities that they, in turn, bring to the fore?
“DO BATS FLY FREE ON THE DARK WEB?” SOUND WAVES AND ECHOLOCATION AS QUEER (MATERIAL, EPHEMERAL) PERFORMANCE
Keeping Haraway’s passion for multispecies thinking close, my initial response to her work on disembodied vision is to turn to bats, from whose practices of “seeing” I believe the proposal of “a new feminist embodiment” might be enacted. Drew Daniel briefly mentions the act of “echolocation” as a queer listening practice in his text *All Sound Is Queer*, which I will touch more on later. In some sense, the classification of echolocation as a mode of “seeing” within popular discourses is in and of itself an evidence of the ‘primacy of the visual.’ That this type of wayfinding might be classified solely as a visual mode represents an investment in gaze as the sole progenitor of information. Given this, echolocation stands out as an important framework because of its ability to duck behind visuality while establishing a haptic process of navigation. Moreover, I am curious about what possibilities might unfold by eschewing *strictly visual* language for words that do not point directly at any single “sense” of finding one’s way.

The process of echolocation consists of two parts: in the first stage, the bat moves air through their mouth or nose in the same way as a human might produce speech sounds, although often in registers undetectable to the human ear. The air’s...

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25 The title from this section comes from a text my dad sent me in a somewhat characteristic, semi-illegible conversational spurt between the two of us. Although he wasn’t typing with echolocational practices in mind, the question ties Haraway’s consideration of the increasingly technologically disembodied “eye that fucks the world” (which is to say, the eye that is given increased military and surveillance scope and license through hegemonic technological advancements, rather than a “natural” eye whose untouched status is ruined through its new relationship to technological apparatus) with the locational practices of bats, whose use of sound waves here extends past the locale of light-less caves and makes its way to the technosphere that is the internet and, perhaps more broadly, the technologically mediated and inflected world at large. If the answer to my dad’s then-rhetorical textual device is, as I would hope it to be, some variation of “yes,” it leads one to consider the liberational possibilities of sound (listening-feeling) within an aesthetic and semiotic realm dominated by sterile disembodiment looming under the title of “Gaze.”

26 The concept of the “haptic” will come up later in my discussion of Nguyen and his invocation of “haptic vision.” In both cases, the “haptic” refers to a sense of touch. Given this,
passage through these orifices generates sound waves that are sent off into the surrounding darkness in search of points of contact. Bats will change their patterns of vocalization situationally, however the emission of sounds is often a repetitive flurry of multi-tonal utterances that bounce semi-rhythmically. The resulting sonic pattern is a series of squeaks and chirps in quick succession, non-reverberant with a short release, moving with one another like the backing track of a techno or house mix\(^{27}\) (and, of course, where better to echolocate but the dark, musty cave of a nightclub?).

In the second stage, the animal listens closely for the echo of the soundwaves they have emitted bouncing off of nearby obstacles, thus creating a spatialized map of their surroundings similar to the situating capabilities of stereoscopic vision in other animals. As humans construct a multi-dimensional field of vision through the collaboration of both eyes, bats situate themselves three dimensionally through the directional differentiation of the stimulus their ears collect. These echoes are refractions of the original sound, resonances of the bat’s vocal patterns that find their way back to its attentive ear. The use of soundwaves to illuminate an otherwise empty space implicates embodied movement in a process of looking. Without the ears, mouth, and nose, this mode of vision would not be possible.

Importantly, the bat’s mode of seeing circumvents the structure of eyespecific sight and instead mobilizes the material qualities of sound to enact a type of mobile positioning, a wayfinding that feels and listens as it sees.\(^{28}\) For Haraway, a

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"haptic" navigation uses a sense of physical feeling to establish oneself locationally rather than solely a sense of isolated vision.\(^{27}\) [https://askabiologist.asu.edu/echolocation](https://askabiologist.asu.edu/echolocation)

\(^{28}\) The language of wayfinding here contains an echo of Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s discussion of queerness, blackness, and the middle passage in her piece *Queer Atlantic, Black Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of The Middle Passage*. Tinsley considers intimate same sex relationships in the cargo holds of slave ships, describing how those forced into close quarters in these spaces felt “of and for” each other as they resisted the “liquidation of their
necessary response to the “eye that fucks the world” is to account for the essentialism existent in its fixity as well as in the impulse towards a ‘counter-gaze’ or the situation of the wandering, colonial patriarchal, eye steadfastly in the body of a subaltern subject. With these insufficient responses in mind, she proposes that the enactment of feminist embodiment necessarily foregrounds movement and plurality rather than the static reliance on identity categories to right the sensorial wrongs of “White Capitalist Patriarchy (how may we name this scandalous Thing?)” and its historical underpinnings. She writes that:

Feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning. Embodiment is significant prosthesis; objectivity cannot be about fixed vision when what counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about. (588)

In addressing the topic of ‘feminist objectivity,’ Haraway approaches embodiment as an initial site of reconfiguring the cartesian displacement of the White Capitalist Patriarchal eye (and increasingly, techno-eye) from its body and thus, from the social context and consequences of its construction and gaze. Rather than fixate on a proper site (sight) from which this embodiment might occur, she uses a series of abstract nouns to or circumvent a “reified body.” These artifacts of such an embodiment

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sentient selves.” This process of affective, navigational, resistance is queer in the sense that it brings people together in formations that might be read as “LGBT” today, but also because of its resistance to the attempt at making enslaved Africans into fully transparent being/non-beings. She writes, “Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths. Reading for shipmates does not offer to clarify, to tell a documentable story of Atlantic, Caribbean, immigrant, or “gay” pasts. Instead it disrupts provocatively.” (199). Wayfinding hangs heavy on water. Listening and feeling move as covert relational and survival strategies in the queer, black, Atlantic.

29 Haraway, p.592
gesture towards the three dimensional materiality of space: fields require dimensions within which to position themselves, inflections exist three dimensionally, requiring space within which to bounce, orientations navigate directionally.

Echolocation (and, more broadly, the movement of sound waves through space) necessarily works within such a setup, actively reconstituting vision within a three dimensional field and through the frameworks of movement (and, as Haraway states, ‘material-semiotics’). In this sense, it provides a roadmap for reconsidering sight and its nearby relative, visual representation, through sound as an affective positioning mechanism rather than solely under the auspices of soundtrack, language, and dialogue through which it is often considered within cultural studies. To echolocate is to feel and listen one’s way through time and space while eschewing the White (Colonialist-Imperialist) Capitalist Patriarchal imperative to categorize, and thus conquer, the sensorium at hand. If, in existing western scientific modes, raw data has been capitulated as something to be extracted from a perpetually ripe matrix of inquiries, the emphasis on bouncing and returning sound waves in the process of echolocation stresses a reciprocality between a moving navigational node and the space in which it, too, is gaining shape. The process of echolocation asks for a physical attunement, to borrow from Sara Johnson’s language on performance, to a series of disjointed and multilocational stimuli traceable through their slightest impressions left upon their point of origin and return, the body-in-flight.

Within this framework, another word for sound might be “noise,” an object that implicates the process of listening, yet that is entirely ancillary whereas sound is

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30 This phrase will come up in more depth later. Johnson brings up the terminology of attunement in her piece on the “French Set Girls” as a strategic means of positioning oneself to diasporic performances and the intentionality thereof (that’s not what it means here but she’s talking about sound and it’s a helpful linguistic model).
not. “Noise,” incidentally, is colloquially understood through its visual qualities, calling to mind a television’s static as it oscillates between accessible and non-accessible channels, or the informational interference that lingers in video, film, and digital representations of low-light scenarios when shot on a device without high resolution capabilities. Bats flying free on the dark web have plenty of noise with which to direct themselves. In an increasingly digital milieu, the static of media aparati have submersive qualities that simultaneously fill airspace and provide historiographical markers through which subjects—flying or stationary—might self-locate. Within the discipline of sound studies, noise is approached relationally with respect to sound. In the context of this relationship, the points of departure between sound and noise render broader social power differentials tangible and sonorous. Douglas Kahn notes that

the grinding sound of power relations are heard in the way noises contain (italics added) the other, in both senses of the word. Noises are informed by the sounds, languages, and social position of others. It’s only because certain types of people are outside any representation of social harmony that their speech and other sounds associated with them are considered to be noise. Here, noise’s containment of a social ‘other’ grants it material qualities and physical aptitude; noise exists because sound does, in subsumptive excess of socially recognized tonal-vibrational-expression. Not only is noise the term applied to non-melodic sounds, but it attaches itself onto communicative forms that resist social classification. Kahn maps noise as a physical force in excess of socially determined boundaries of “harmony.” This multi-spaciality is a physical presence, a lingering membrane informing and clogging the channels running between the “harmonious” objects it surrounds.
Noise’s technological valences place it within a field of intersecting informational channels constantly navigating both abstract and concrete forms of cultural and data-driven knowledge. This occurs through a constellation of receptive sites and interactive zones, similar to the twisting and shooting formation of a rhizome. This type of information has velocity and texture, it speeds through informational channels and its contact with other informational streams is felt.

Electronic noise, or “unwanted disturbances in the electrical field,” is necessarily a deviance from intended meaning systems. It is an accident, a physical block shifting the intended-as-linear movement of messages between one point and the next. Tiziana Terranova addresses noise in this sense in her piece “Communication Beyond Meaning: On The Cultural Politics of Information,” extending Haraway’s analysis of embodied vision from her point of departure in the “hard sciences” into the realm of cultural and information studies. Terranova identifies an increasingly dense web of empty signifiers that have developed through the intensification of a technological capitalism for whom ‘culture’ is quantifiable through its exchange value. She asks: “Is it possible to draw on scientific concepts to further our understanding of cultural processes?” Decidedly, scientific concepts provide the opportunity to mutate existing notions of (and reliances on) “meaning” through the unique movements of information within its channels.

Terranova connects noise with information through the framework of transmission, i.e. the communication of messages through channels that inevitably also are subject to noise interference. She notes: “Information can only be defined as

31 Kahn, "Noises of the Avant Garde," The Sound Studies Reader, p.429.
32 Motchenbacher & Connelly, Low-noise electronic system design, np.
a ratio of signal to noise….Furthermore, not all information is strictly meaningful…. To a human ear, the information contained in encrypted bits might appear literally as hisses and noise (as in the emblematic sound of a modem connecting to the Internet).”

Terranova problematizes the role played by codified “meaning” in communication through recognition of the noises that constantly flood our message transmissions. In doing so, she implicitly suggests that the prevailing mode of semiotic interpretation relies on the eschewing of noise into an unknown sphere. Now, she asks: “How can we accept that noise can be just bracketed off somewhere in a box outside the communication diagram?” She follows this question by echoing Sterne’s critique of the valorization of listening through the “audiovisual litany,” noting that even the process of hearing a sound (which we can understand as information) implies an active process of compression and simplification—involving layers of unconscious perception.” Noise is a significant element of communication explicitly erased from discourses on meaning, labeled as unfit, unclear, and unnecessary. It is even erased from many discourses on sound, which attempt to scrub the sonic clean so as to depict it as a pure interiority at odds with the “fallen sense” of vision. Of course, that which is erased by the hegemonic politic is most often incredibly powerful. Subsequently, the noise haunting our communication channels is of utmost importance to recognize rather than brush aside.

Along these lines, Terranova cites an approach to hegemonic systems of communication (i.e. the U.S. media machine, particularly in regards to politics) that

34 Ibid, 56.
36 Ibid, 67.
37 Sterne, The Audible Past, 15.
attempts to fix the “bad” communications with “more” and “better” messages. Importantly, this rings similarly to representational politics’ approach to pornography, wherein the answer to “bad” pornography wherein “more” and “better” pornography are inserted into the same archive, using the same formal tactics as the old stuff. Rebuffing this approach as the ultimate tactic for combatting “all social problems,” Terranova writes that “it is not so much a question of meanings that are encoded and decoded in texts but a question of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, of informational warfare, and new forms of knowledge and power (...) that address not so much the play of meaning but the overall dynamics of an open informational milieu.” Rather than approach cultural hegemony solely by flipping what messages are being popularly represented, Terranova argues for an entirely different framework through which to conceive what makes up “the message” to begin with. This network is playful, erratic, and evasive of any demand that it explain itself succinctly to outside onlookers.

Importantly, this mode of seeing/hearing/feeling has queer resonances, particularly in its relationship to ephemerality. A central implication of Terranova’s work is, in some sense, a queering of meaning. In this case, I use “queering” to refer to the ways in which Terranova’s approach to information re-figures non-normative communications (particularly in the form of noise) as a necessary factor in message sending that has been silenced in the search of meaning. Rather than approach cultural hegemony solely by flipping what messages are being popularly represented, Terranova argues for an entirely different framework through which to conceive what makes up “the message” to begin with. Moreover, this new approach destabilizes the

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38 Ibid, 2.
concept that all communication must be productive in a normative, capitalistic, sense. Noise does not provide the greater body politic with meaningful progeny. Just as heterosexual rhetorics fear non-reproductive sex in the hands of queers, the hegemonic politic is threatened by communicative modes that do not explicitly make something of themselves for the Greater Society At Large.

Jose Muñoz considers the necessarily ephemeral or fleeting elements of queerness throughout his work and, in particular, *Cruising Utopia*. Although he uses the language of gesture and visuality, Muñoz’s language surrounding queerness and ephemerality draws strong parallels to sound and soundwaves. This is particularly true of noise, those sounds that are erased from public listening practices and overlooked within the semi-public of quotidian soundscapes and communications. He notes that queer artworks often require being “read into” as well as an amount of vanishability in order to safely exist as testaments to queer lives and feelings. He describes queerness as ‘illegible,’ so as to map the extent to which it is lost to and obscured by the heteronormative world. That ephemera might easily disappear, go into hiding, or mislead those without the language to interpret it allows it as an important material of resistance against the mandate that minoritarian subjects be “knowable” for a majoritarian sphere. This mandate is imposed governmentally through documents such as the census as well as interpersonally through the expectation that individuals be able to communicate their sexual or racial identities to others in passing conversation. The question that comes to mind is: “What are you, really?” Muñoz furthers this argument through a consideration of the “ghosts of

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39 Ibid, 2.
public sex,” the visual traces of cruising left behind in the face of gentrification and laws demarcating the uses of public and private space, as well as the AIDS crisis and its effect on anonymous sex practices.

Muñoz explicates the role of ephemerality in queerness through a series of images of a gleaming public bathroom fabricated by Tony Just. The works are situated in a men’s bathroom in New York City that had been shut down during the AIDS crisis. Just had scrubbed the room clean, subsequently making a number of images ranging in abstraction that depict the glimmer of the newly sanitized space. The images’ impossible cleanliness point to the erasure of past public sexual encounters, to the histories of cruising that were and are a significant mode of gay sociality. Muñoz describes this piece as a “queer act” through the language of a tangible ghostliness similar to my previous configuration of soundwaves. He writes:

"The ghosts I detect in Just's project possess a materiality, a kind of substance, that does not easily appear within regimes of the visible and the tactile. These elements have their own specificity but are also relevant on a vaster map of social and political experience. To see these ghosts we must certainly read the "specific dealings, specific rhythms" that bring to life a lost experience, a temporally situated picture of social experience, that needs to be read in photo images, gaps, auras, residues, and negations."

Muñoz’s attunement to the simultaneous materiality and minimal visuality of the ghosts of Just’s project mirrors my own interest in the tenuously identifiable presence of soundwaves in physical space. Muñoz spots glimmers and sticky residues of queerness along the surfaces of the public sphere, cuing into their presence-through-absence in Just’s photographs. What should stop him—or anyone—from being able to hear them, too?

\[40\] Muñoz, “Ghosts of Public Sex,” 363.
Moreover, if queerness is something that necessarily flits by, is material through acts of disappearance and of the accumulation of ephemera, it is certainly defiant of classification. In his piece *All Sound Is Queer*, Drew Daniel pivots on an ephemerality of a type to reconceptualize “sound” away from “music” to make his titular argument. Daniel argues for the generative potential of listening that takes a turn against impulses to label, categorize, and Know with regards to what we hear and ‘who we are.’ Certainly, queer echoes are ringing in this language. His understanding of sound is confusing/confused, bodily, amorphous, multisensorial, and multi-species. Within the bounds of the question of what sound is, Daniel asks what sound *does* and how we might engage with it in order to differently experience our subjectified bodies in a manner that holds queer potential.

Daniel argues that “sound - not music but *sound* - can let us hear what is not yet locatable on the available maps of identity. Hearing the queerness of sound might help us echolocate the edges of subjection and encounter everything that stands outside the hailing process.”[^42] And back to echolocation! Listening the way out of top-down identity categories, Daniel similarly puts faith in multispecies collaborative frameworks to renegotiate the edges of bodily formation and their bearings on subject formation and subjectification. Against the grain of the visibility-seeking identity politics of the 1990s, Daniel notes that “seeing and being seen is business as usual.”[^43] Listening and being heard, however, have the potential to make “me” and “you” (as well as the space surrounding “us”) harder to classify and thus destabilize western

[^41]: Ibid, 10.


[^43]: Ibid, 4.
empiricist impulses towards violent classification through the discomfort of not knowing, and not being able to escape the unknown.

Undergirding the argument is a particular attentiveness to the anatomy of the ear itself. Daniel describes of the ears a “promiscuous open-ness,” inherently tying their function to the excess of the sounds they encounter and cannot un-, or simply not, hear. Inescapable sounds are a part of Daniel’s question regarding “the sound of the world” (as brought up in M.P. Shiel’s short story “The House of Sounds) and his curiosity regarding what audioscapes exist in excess of language and meaning-centric human experiences of sound and what happens when we listen for them. For Daniel, purposefully tuning into the sounds of the world that cannot feasibly be tuned out but that are often ignored is a queer gesture. In the story, a little girl takes on the task of identifying “the sound of the world,” only to eventually go “mad as a March-hare.”

Daniel wonders: “For what is this openness to the tune and tone of experience, a twist which inspires horror and confusion in the bystanders who represent the productive adult world, if not a kind of audio-orientation, a sonosexuality?” Promiscuously open, ears exhibit a unique vulnerability to unnecessary sounds, noises that disrupt the narrative flow of the day-to-day. Tuning into these sounds is a matter of re-orientation, akin to the ways in which bearers of non-normative sexual orientations position themselves elsewhere than in-towards the heterosexual nuclear family unit of reproduction. Daniel asks what the sound of sex is, wondering if it is “real sex” and what “real sex” even is to begin with. If the ear is promiscuous but perhaps not

44 Ibid, 4.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 6.
attuned to any ‘authentic’ sound of sex, the question arises as to what sounds it gravitates towards in sexual contexts.

Notably, Daniel’s interest in the ear’s promiscuity has to do with its boundless receptivity rather than its function as a filtering device. While he approaches “the ear” as a universal entity, biologically disposed towards receptivity, its behavior is conjugated through socially trained listening practices. For example, the deliberate erasure of noise from the ‘acceptable sonic sphere’ accounted for by Terranova: “ears” and, in particular, white ears, frequently do demand that sounds deemed ‘noise’ be stopped. Frequently, these are sounds attributed to blackness.\(^47\) This history has reverberations that necessarily require purposeful acts of hearing, particularly when it is unclear whose ‘ear’ we are talking about. Despite Daniel’s failure to account for the particular histories informing different ears’ processes of reception, he offers a useful means of thinking about receptivity. I am excited about the potential of integrating the unaccounted-for with Daniel’s boundlessly listening ear. Even when asked not to, the ear swallows and swallows and swallows.

Moreover, Daniel’s language of promiscuity might support a “slutty listening,” a process of leaning into the ear’s frenetic impulses so as to swerve the question of what is “real” in favor of what is pleasurable. Slutty here is an affirmative position, one that falls back into its contradictions without the imperative that it be rescued for purposes of the public eye. This invocation of “sluttiness” operates as a

\(^{47}\) I bring up racialized listening here alongside the “white ear” to push against Daniel’s utopic conversation of “the ear” as an entity that can be spoken about it any sweeping gestures. However, this is not to suggest that POC are in a constant totalizing state of violation by this apparatus, which is a question that has been taken up by many writers of color. In addition to scholarship on “The Sonic Color Line,” a term coined by Jennifer Stoever, and its implications in regards to the enforcement of racialized social hierarchies, there is a breadth of scholarship by writers of color on the elements of racialized listening that consider subversive responses to this phenomena that are not making it into this section but are nonetheless a
way of lingering with receptivity—in all of its pleasure and contradictions—rather than arguing against it. Given the violent history of sonic misrecognition in the interests of political hegemony, slutty listening is a necessary means of rerouting the social predispositions of the ear (i.e. ‘prudish’ listening). The phrase ‘slutty listening’ also enacts a response to the conflation of listening with feminine and racialized receptivity and submission within a sensorial hierarchy for which vision is a superlatively “legitimate” approach. I’d like to keep this in mind while turning directly to pornography, where promiscuity is front and center. Approaching porn sonically might and should be an act of promiscuity in and of itself, of listening (and feeling) expansively for the sounds and (non-) silences that make up the ‘world’ of the genre. What is the sound of pornography?

significant addition to sound studies that frequently go overlooked in favor of discourses about “the ear,” sans prefix.
PORNOGRAPHY AS/AND THE UNSPEAKABLE

Figure 4, Tee Vee Dinner, *Queen Bee Empire*, 2014.
At the risk of answering the previous chapter’s final question too soon, I will start this section by noting that the sound of pornography and the stakes it represents are, perhaps not surprisingly, contested. The “sound of pornography” is not always as audible as a high-volume shriek of pleasure-pain, or as Sally’s fake orgasm in *When Harry Met Sally*. In her book *Bound and Gagged*, Laura Kipnis describes pornography as a form of speech deployed around “subjects and issues” that are the most “unspeakable.” Immediately, this analysis of pornography bears sonic resonances that invite further questioning. For Kipnis, the visual and literary imagery of pornography solidifies a realm of fantasy that actively seeks to “unnerve” popular sensibilities surrounding sexual practice and desire. Whereas non-normative or ‘shocking’ fantasies are marginalized within and barred from mainstream discourses on culture, pornography fixates on these sites of abjection, frequently to an extreme. The popularity of incest porn provides an example of this phenomena: viewers ‘get off’ on the taboo of pornographic consumption in a manner that stems from and perhaps willfully reproduces the ultimate unacceptability of the fantasy. Very few people will admit to “actually” wanting to have sex with their family members and discourses on incest remain centered around relations of abuse, however the desirous fantasy that follows these incomplete discourses gains life in pornographic representation.

Importantly, these fantasies remark upon a highly significant element of social life outside of sex as well. Kipnis also ties this unspeakability to the visual language of pornography as well as to the political and quotidian stakes of pornography dictated by state censorship and bodily control, noting the “two Virginia men [sent] to
prison for over thirty years for having the wrong fantasies, and for being incautious enough to verbalize them in the wrong place” (xi-x). Paul B. Preciado further illustrates the bounds of this relationship through his framework of “The Pharmocopornographic Era,” wherein state power is disseminated through a confluence of pharmacological (“biomolecular”48) and pornographic (“semiotic technical”49) biocontrol. The government sustains social control through economies surrounding sex (in this case, exemplified through mainstream pornography in a variety of forms, including the Playboy enterprise) and the pharmaceuticals, such as Viagra, The Pill, and tritherapy for AIDS, that surround them.

Sex, as David Halperin argues in the introduction to The War On Sex, is under attack. This attack has taken hold in the past few decades and it is particularly directed towards LGTBQ communities and communities of color. This attack is waged in the court system through the vehement policing of commercial sex work under the guise of human trafficking prevention, through increasing cutbacks to funding for sex education and safer sex resources, and through the disproportionate sentencing of sex crimes in relation to even the most violent of crimes. It is profited off of by “politicians and academics, therapists and police officers, journalists and moralists.”50 It is clear that the fantasies expressed within pornography are not and cannot be “just fantasies.” They are in direct relation to apparati of The State and thus have the powerful potential to simultaneously bolster and degrade the social and hierarchies it necessarily perpetuates. Given this, Kipnis’ contextualization of the stakes of pornographic analysis within the bounds of late capitalist state (-carceral)

48 Preciado, Testo-Junkie, 33.
49 Ibid.
50 Halperin, The War On Sex, 1.
power render the silence of pornography’s depiction of that-which-has-been-silenced increasingly poignant. “The world is waging a war on sex.”

In the wake the ‘unspeakability’ of pornographic content and non-normative sexual desire, Kipnis urges a reading “between bodies” that creatively approaches pornography by questioning the ways in which we might regard it and that it, in turn, “regards us” (xiii). Here, the language of viewership invokes an enactment of vision as a critical approach to pornography’s reaches; regarding porn requires viewing it, whether the “it” be a video, still image, or literary text. Still, Kipnis’ claims surrounding porn are riddled with sound. Through reference to speech, though largely in the abstract, Kipnis’ language is entangled in the concrete processes of listening, hearing, and producing sound. She asks, “if you put [pornography] on the couch and let it free-associate, what is it really saying?” Speaking for the unspeakable, pornography is an object or process to be regarded through critical listenership in addition to the visual elements that dominate discourse on the topic.

As Kipnis searches to find communicable value in the meaning-making of porn, however backwards this process might be, she renders legible and material the speech of pornography as a systematically mapped out form of communications. Amidst 1990s social panic about porn and feminist debates linking it to physical violence against women, Kipnis moves to legitimate porn through the argument that it “is a form of cultural expression” and “an essential form of contemporary national culture.” In response to Catherine MacKinnon and other radical feminist anti-porn writers’ assertion that porn equates to and necessitates action (and specifically, action

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51 Halperin and Hoppe, The War on Sex, 1.
52 Kipnis, Bound and Gagged, 162.
53 Ibid, viii.
that is violence against women), Kipnis turns to vocal expression to represent action without consequence, specifically physical. She identifies the classist (and racist) assumptions underlying the anti-porn conflation of pornography and “violent male behavior,” similar to MacKinnon’s conflation of heterosexual sex with the rape of women, writing that “the fantasy pornography consumer is a walking projection of upper-class fears about lower-class men: brutish, animal-like, sexually voracious….In fact, arguments about the ‘effects’ of culture seem to be situated exclusively in relation to lower cultural forms, that is to pornography, or cartoons, or subcultural forms like gangsta rap” (175). Kipnis’ words paint a clear image of the demonized assumed viewer of pornography, clearly positioned within many of the terms whiteness has constructed to describe black men.

This is particularly salient given the presumed whiteness of the women supposedly wronged by porn’s ‘brute force’ within MacKinnon and her collaborator, Andrea Dworkin’s, discussions. Through anti-pornographic sentiments that fail to specify the relationship between women of color and a pornographic archive that is distinct from that of white women, Dworkin and MacKinnon reify the crusade to protect white femininity—and only white femininity—from outside threats. This selective protectionism further bolsters the image of construed-as-universal black men who consume pornographic images and inevitably repeat the actions on screen in their exactitude or exaggeration. To Kipnis’ point, I would like to add that the ‘effects’ of culture, when measured through racialized and class-ed others, particularly when in response to “low” cultural objects, seem to only be understood through the terms of mimesis. Here, mimesis refers to an understanding of physical actions and subjective “visions” of one’s surroundings that necessarily originate from
a previously existing higher point of reference. In this case, the fear that porn produces or even simply is violence rests on a fear of mimesis: that male viewers will watch pornographic content of female submission and replicate them. The issue here—for Kipnis and her anti-porn interlocutors—does not seem to be that pornography produces different effects than it is purported to, but that the only presumed effect is that of exact—if not exaggerated—repetition.

Kipnis’ language surrounding porn explicitly frames it as an active object—one that regards the reader as well as (presumably physically) grabs them “and does not let go.” Kipnis also beholds the “world of pornography”—physically and symbolically situated in relation to “the edges of culture”—as an impossible one, marked by fantasy, mythology, hyperbole, improbability. However, when the issue of violent action comes up, her response of shying away in favor of arguing for the “complexity” and “legitimacy” of porn as a cultural object enforces the relegation of physical action and performance for those associated with ‘low culture’—poor people and people of color—to acts of mirroring. Rather than asking what porn—and its viewers—might be doing that exists in excess of the linear equation of seeing-and-then-doing-as-such, Kipnis leaves untouched the assumed conflation of action with mimesis for consumers of pornography. Importantly, something unspeakable is not necessarily something silent, nor are all forms of speech equally legible. In between bodies bounce sound waves that travel with meaning—and speech—in mind, but also that produce something in excess of the realm of legible communication, which is certainly a do-ing. This is to say that, while Kipnis’ claim regarding porn as a form of

54 Kipnis, Bound and Gagged, 160.
speech remarks upon a process of making audible meaning of a silent realm, that sonic shift need not be so linear.

Moreover, the relegation of the concept of “speech” to a diminutive descriptive form forgets the active, performative, elements of sound and silence that exist in excess of mimesis. This is to say that the argument that porn speaks, rather than acts, forgets the wide space within which the saying (sounding) and doing of pornographic content collaboratively enact performance. Another way to address this tension might be to say that porn is performative. And, more specifically, that the sounds of porn—its symbolic speech, its silence, and its moans and groans—are performative. Drawing from J. L. Austin’s notes “on performative utterances,” I establish the “performative” here to describe the ways in which the “speech” realm inhabited by pornography in the time following “radical anti-porn feminism” is necessarily one of action. Austin identifies that particular speech practices, such as the exchanging of marriage vows, necessarily accompany and are valued through their bearings on concrete actions. Given this, I argue that an approach to pornography that does not consider the physical parameters of its speech still risk

55 http://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum54/Austin_on_speechActs.htm
56 Another particularly salient example of this, I would argue, is law enforcement’s declaration of “You have the right to remain silent.” Like marriage rites, judicial rights are enacted through speech to establish the concrete terms of a state-oriented relationship. (Although it is certainly not the case that cops make clear their relationship to any given public through speech and often skip to doing so by brute force - this is also to say that the nature of law enforcement in the United States predetermines the conditions of an exchange between cop and civilian past the terms of Miranda Rights, but the symbolic weight of this encounter is salient here). Stating “you have the right to remain silent,” i.e. enacting a positive conference of the right to silence, implicitly strips the civilian of other unnamed rights. If the cop has the power to grant permission of silence, what is the nature of other modes that go unlisted? Moreover, it grants silence as an action equatable with speech.
reinscribing racialized and classed judgements of “the body” as a force that is necessarily entangled in experiences of pornography.

To further explore the performative elements of pornographic speech, I now turn to a number of artistic sites that expand upon Austin’s analysis, particularly through sound. Importantly, these sites cruise the active dimensions of acts such as speech, sound, and silence, that have been historically minimized in discourses on the impact of pornography. I will start with Jennifer Doyle and David Gesty’s analysis of “Queer Formalism,” which examines the do-ing of minimalist work by making explicit what Kipnis and her interlocutors seem to leave under-examined: the range of bodily responses to art and their gendered, race-d, and class-ed implications, particularly in contexts wherein the expected response to a piece is unclear. Getsy and Doyle call to queer artistic gestures that thrive through a minimalist approach, bringing to the fore the “bitchy” (and otherwise) possibilities at play in visually and physically simplistic artworks. They specifically respond to the panic that queer viewers of art are “reading into” the meaning of artworks not explicitly made for or about ‘them,’ a discomfort that displays an attachment to the realm of the normative and a recognition of its precarity. In the case of porn, “reading into” has the potential to be received with violent connotations, including the erasure of the genre’s violences in the search for pleasure.

Getsy and Doyle speak to the potential modes of relation housed between spectators of art and art objects themselves, particularly in the context of a-referential art. In a similar manner to Kipnis’ anthropomorphism and personification of pornography, Getsy notes the personal qualities of minimalist and formalist sculptures that persist through a lack of figurative representation, writing that
The stubborn recal-citrance of Richard Serra’s “Two Cuts” was physically real as was the frailty of Eva Hesse’s “Connection.” Here materials were being used for their qualities but without instrumentalizing them as “productive” or ‘useful.’

Getsy and Doyle do not ask that art objects accomplish acts of utility, but rather pay mind to their “real”—as in material and affective—implications in the embodied responses of their viewers. In doing so, they provide a range of new metrics for considering the queer doings of non-referential art objects through the relationships and tensions they build with and ask of those who encounter them. This argument might be extended into porn through the framework of “speakability” and, in particular, the speech acts performed within pornographic representation that are left behind by the panic about the violent implications of [mainstream] pornography’s visual formulations of sex.

The piece’s discussion of formalism is also in conversation with the widely held expectation that of artists of color use their art to explain their racialized experiences to a white audience, that they “produce meaningful work” through the sole tactic of explicitly dissecting and making legible their racial identities. Rather than respond to these expectations and critiques by downplaying work about identity as “just about identity,” Getsy and Doyle broaden and renegotiate the bounds of ‘identity’ by rethinking the ways in which art acts upon and receives meaning through an audience, specifically using the terms of embodied responses to minimal artwork to consider non-normative frameworks through which identity might be conceived—such as “speed, gesture, plasticity, or texture.” In regards to the act of bodily

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57 Doyle & Getsy, *Queer Formalisms*, np.
responses to artworks, Getsy remarks: “I think it’s crucial to remember that bodily relations immediately and inescapably activate questions about gender and sexuality.”

John Cage’s 4’33” in many ways illuminates this point as he plays with the do-ings of sound and silence. In the piece, he reminds an audience that “the unspeakable” is perhaps not silent, and that moments without sound have bodily dimensions. In the composition, Cage invites an audience to sit before a performer (on any instrument or set of instruments) for 4 minutes and 33 seconds of anticipatory silence, separated into three precise movements. Through a reworking of the basic traditional format of a music performance that involves one or more musicians manipulating their instruments to intentionally produce sounds, Cage questions what expectations viewers and listeners bring to our considerations of “legitimate music” and legitimate performances thereof. How might these expectations be fruitfully subverted through sonic cues, or through silence? Additionally, how are these expectations embodied physically in an encounter that is meant to build tension? Although the piece does not explicitly engage sex or pornography, it magnifies an experience of bodily relationships to sound and contends with how these relationships, when activated, may open up new modes of spatial and interpersonal relationality.

Having attended a performance of this piece, I remember the excruciating anxiety of sitting through each movement and the acute awareness of time and sound I suddenly felt saddled with. Not only did the piece heighten my awareness of my surroundings, but it activated my awareness of the extent to which my bodily movements—my compulsive fidgeting and knuckle-cracking, my rumbling stomach, the squeaking desk moving under my elbows—were refusing complicity with a
collective silence. Whereas the first movement is relatively short—around thirty seconds—the second two are much longer by comparison. The priming of an audience for particular temporalities of silence through this graduation of movement length increases the attention to silent time in the later movements, which becomes affectively(effectively) excessive in relation to the first movement. Considering Getsy and Doyle’s conversation on Queer Formalism, John Cage’s production of a non-silence can be read as a queer gesture whose lack of explicit referentiality turns the focus of its viewership inwards, towards their embodied existences, and outwards, to the tensions that these embodied existences have with other bodies in the room, whose space takes on new meaning through the flipping of normative spacial and sonic expectations that 4’33” sets up.

Reading 4’33”’s treatment of silence with Drew Daniel’s treatment of the “sound of the world,” a gesture towards the ambient, shifting, and unclassifiable sounds that haunt daily interaction, the question also arises as to whether or not the 4 minutes and 33 seconds of Cage’s silence are, in fact, silence at all. If they are silence, it is largely because of their relationship to an expectation of ‘Music,’ rather than the sound that replaces it. In the same way that a fallow field is not necessarily ‘empty’ but, rather, resting and returning to the growth of non-crop life, and facilitating alternative fertilities, John Cage’s silence provides explicit grounds upon which a ‘resting audioscape’ might bloom. In this way, the non-silence perhaps reframes the excessive and constantly present ‘sounds of the world’ presented by Daniels by drawing attention to it, and to the constant impossibility of any true lack of sound. Cage’s drawing out and facilitation of acute sonic hypersensitivity in a

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Daniel, All Sound is Queer, 3.
participating audience through a subversion of sonic expectation speaks to the realm of the erotic (and queer modes of being) in its activation of a non-normative mode of occupying [sonic] space. This drawing out potentiates new communal relational modes (within the context of the supposed attendees of a performance of 4’33”, as well as within the context of a solo performance of the piece) framed through and within a bodily relationship to sound and expectations thereof. Cage’s performance activates a perhaps hyper-aware attending-to of the sonic contents of a physical space by putting listener-viewers in a situation in which their expectation of sound is made explicit. By creating a non-silence through the deprivation of expected music, Cage facilitates an examination and renewal of the bodily relationships and dependencies to ambient sound in the room the performance occupies.

The performative dimensions of sound are further illuminated in Sarah Hennies and Third Angle New Music’s “Contralto,” which deconstructs the language and sounds of gender performance through musical-documentary form. A multimedia work for video and live instruments, Contralto asks that the audience “close [their] eyes and breathe deeply, but comfortably” as it examines the intricate and often erratic relationship between sound and gender. Fabricating a diverse score by combining a-tonal expressions of sound and interview-style statements from a cast of trans women, Sarah Hennies unearths a unique language of sound that engages the often erratic sonics of gender expression. The piece’s title references a musical term for “the lowest female singing voice,” calling to the fore experiences of trans women choosing to transition using estrogen, which does not lead to the same vocal changes as those experienced by trans people transitioning using testosterone.
The video is formally structured by interviews with a cast of trans women, who are framed on screen in documentary style mid shots against a white background. The piece quickly departs from traditional documentary conventions, splicing together the interview footage to the point of complete sonic abstraction. The content ebbs and flows between this state of abstraction and more lengthy, conversational, comments in which the women note their experiences of gender and trans-ness as informed by voice. The video’s introduction, set to the crisp sounds of clicking typewriter keys, includes footage of the women performing vocal exercises, pronouncing “HaA…,” “hEee,” “hHiiii,” “hEeeey,” “ho,” “jO,” “hiih,” to the camera, followed by a collective sung-scream whose harmony mimics that of the opening tuning session of an orchestra. This segment is immediately followed by clips of the women’s interviews wherein linguistic conjunctions sound like the words from the vocal exercises, making an explicit parallel between conversational speech and the types of training that a singer might go through to prepare for a performance. These shrill vocal calls and their orchestral accompaniments (which are live in performances of the video but absent during remote screenings) that break up different sections of the piece punctuate the development of a narrative about gender’s relationship to voice, serving as an abstract interlocutor for the video’s anecdotal elements.
Importantly, the vocal exercises are specifically modeled after “vocal feminization training,” an approach aimed at shifting vocal patterns to align more closely with expectations of cisgender models of “female speech.” Given this parallel, the performative elements of gender (both in Butler’s sense of socially enforced repetition and in the more strictly theatrical sense of the word) are invoked through their “non-musical,” “a-linguistic” sonic constituents in speech and other modes of interactive sound-making. Through this comparison, Hennies cues into the ways in which conversational language intersects with gender performance while also
breaking down the incomprehensible elements of vocalization that continually inform frameworks of gender. Along one line, the women in the video negotiate their gender performances through frameworks of “identity” grounded around politics of legibility and coherent narrativity. This baseline is set up through the documentary format, which, as a genre, historically utilizes ‘trustworthy’ narrators to weave a succinct narrative. At a more basic level, the structure of a traditional ‘interview’ largely supposes that an interview-ee have something legible to offer those symbolically aligned with the interview-er. However, Hennies immediately subverts the expectation of a clean, immediately identifiable “message” (within the video at large as well as something that the women might have to “offer up” to viewers). Through the sharp, muddled, and occasionally jarring sounds within their speech patterns, she locates experiences of gender and trans-ness within the parts of language that are cut off from one another, often to the point of complete abstraction. For Hennies, “speech” is an assemblage of mercurial sonic bits, each enacting performances of and negotiations with the constructs of gender and the ways in which they are mapped most scrutinizingly onto trans bodies.

Through these artistic sites, the active performances of sound, speech, and the unspeakable are feel-able. When gender is too much for words, it becomes corporeal through sound. Even the “unspeakable,” moments of silence and anticipation, have tangible effects that extend outwards past their temporal specificity. This is also to say that the noises of pornography, symbolic and otherwise, “consummate” something. Porn does lots! That porn does lots does not remove pornographic works from scrutiny, nor does it forgo the possibility that particular pieces do enact violence of various types. However, it does open up the potential for conversation surrounding
what Fred Moten hears in photography: “a mimetic improvisation of and with that materiality that moves in excess of meaning.”

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59 Moten, *Black Mo’nin’ and The Sound of The Photograph*, 63.
“LISTENING FROM THE BOTTOM”: RE-SOUNDING PORNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Figure 6. Robert Hill, He’s A Girl 1 – SCENE 1, 2013.
Listening to photography, Fred Moten provides a new way of thinking about the visual. In his book *A View From The Bottom*, Nguyen Tan Hoang similarly offers a new approach to looking. With these alternative visualities in mind, I now turn to the question of how a problematization of the visual might accompany renewed listening practices around receptivity, abjection, and pleasure from “below.” Although Hoang does not explicitly utilize sound as an analytic paradigm, he vitally deconstructs interpretations of pornography that rely heavily on disembodied vision to imbue the genre with inescapably violent implications. By opening up strategies of counter viewing, Hoang effectively destabilizes the hegemony of optics’ formulation of vision as a monolithic and unidirectional apparatus. In doing so, he makes room for alternative pornographic analyses, including those foregrounding sound.

From its title, it is immediately apparent that *A View From The Bottom* will be about sight, but this sight is distinct from that of Haraway’s ‘eye that fucks the world,’ insofar as it provides a place, feeling, and positionality of viewership. Bottomhood calls seductively, the eye gets fucked and enjoys it. Hoang asserts that “affirming bottomhood, femininity, and race together rewrite abject masculinity without writing off femininity and the feminine, thus enabling a new mode of social recognition.” Hoang troubles vision instead of shying entirely away from it: it is through attention to the remnants of an overdetermined visual realm that he makes this encounter with abject sexuality. For Hoang, rewriting abject masculinity requires new ways of relating as well as of reading and seeing: bottomhood, he asserts, is “a

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60 Hoang, *A View From The Bottom*, 19.
sexual position, a social alliance, an affective bond, and an aesthetic form.” In this context, bottomhood is a mode of sight in and of itself. ‘Viewing from the bottom’ also includes ‘anal vision,’ a receptive means of looking centered around reflection and passivity as opposed to the aggression often attributed to “the male gaze.” Rather than taking the hierarchy of vision (i.e. essentializing vision as aggressive act of hierarchy) as a given or attempting to put marginalized modes of seeing “on top,” Hoang takes an approach “from the bottom,” leaning into the feminized/racialized/minimized sexual position and identification. Along this line, Hoang responds to Asian American literary analyses of bottomhood that he sees as reifying hegemonic idealizations of white, heteronormative (or homonormative) masculinity by attempting to remedy the conflation of Asian men with femininity, or Asian with Anus.

Hoang also expands the realm of vision by considering the concept of “haptic vision,” which extends bodily dimensions to ways of looking. He repurposes this concept from theorist Laura Marks, who theorizes haptic visuality as “a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image, whereby ‘the eyes themselves function like organs of touch’ (2002, 2).” This type of vision is used to problematize what Hoang calls “optical visuality,” the mode of vision I engaged in “Hegemony of Optics” that “entails distance between beholder and object and encourages identification and projection.” Turning from this approach to sight, haptic vision situates viewing within the broader terminology of perception, inviting embodied vision practices that consider shifting relationships of proximity rather than operating through constant self-isolation. In Chapter 3, The Lover’s Gorgeous Ass, Hoang uses

61 Ibid, 2.
this visual mode to approach representations of the Asian male protagonist, Leung, in the film *The Lover*. Hoang fixates on Leung’s exposed ass in the film’s sex scenes, treating it as a focal point tied to the existing relationship between Asian men and feminized vulnerability. He writes:

Incorporating all of these bodily negotiations into our reading of Asian masculinity in *The Lover* allows us to imagine other possibilities besides a hard, exit-only brand of masculine body, one that rigorously disavows its anal permeability. Perceiving haptically, working to reconstitute the image, one senses and makes sense that Leung’s trembling ass opens up other ways for thinking about not just Asian masculinity but masculinities at large” (140).

Importantly, Hoang views Leung’s ass through its ability to negotiate new forms of masculinity when approached through haptic vision. The open anus is not “simply” evidence of a wound, nor is haptic vision concerned with shielding its eyes from the vulnerabilities of visual representation. Hoang leans into the image’s sphere through a touching-feeling eye, physically reconstituting and reimagining the visual iconography at hand. Just as porn within Kipnis’ imaginary takes on tangible, physical, qualities, porn in Hoang’s book carries out multiple levels of signification at once.

The auditory possibilities that accompany Hoang’s “new angle” of viewing and experiencing bottomhood are huge in terms of their ability to further queer the archive through cross temporal and multi-spatial significations and identifications. One might ask not only what it means to see from the bottom, but what it is to hear from the bottom, or what audioscapes inhabit the bottom at all. Additionally, it is

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62 Ibid, 140.
fruitful to question the possibilities of hearing through space and time with bottomhood in mind, and how the physically amorphous formal qualities of sound might productively trouble the impossibilities surrounding abject racial/sexual/gender identifications and constructions. In enacting new methods of seeing in order to affirm (rather than attempt to normalize) visual representations of gay asian men, *A View From the Bottom* begins to gesture to the significant relationships between sound/hearing and vision that may be engaged with to explore the racialized meanings and pleasurable possibilities that sound and hearing - in addition to sight and looking - holds for resignifying sites of sexual-racialized-gendered abjection. 

Taking a note from Hoang’s practice of viewership across pornographic archives (and keeping in mind that hearing and seeing are never as distinct as they seem), I would now like to consider how one might *listen* “from the bottom.” Hoang himself engages in a flirtation with sound as an overlapping force and analytic strategy with sight and vision, cueing into the sounds of pornography through an analysis of accent and language, which may be carried through to a-linguistic performances of pleasure such as moans, cries, screams, sex toy rumbles, breathing and breathiness. Importantly, this is a strategy of critical viewer-listenership that does not seek to fix porn or, as Hoang notes, rescue a “bad gay past.” Rather, Hoang’s approach reorients pornography (and its depiction and construction of masculinity, race, and sexual abjection) from below. Through this reorientation, the “bad past” of pornography is not “saved,” but rendered essentially sensorially fraught. Such an approach opens pornographic materials to a critical re-fabulation of the variety of things they might “do,” particularly when they are approached echolocationally.
Hoang’s vision is multi-spatial and multitemporal in a manner similar to my own analysis of sound. Vision for Hoang is “an activity that seeks satisfaction, like a mouth that copiously consumes or a butt that wants to get stuffed.”63 His approach from the bottom leans into the ambiguities of vision, challenging the implication of the audiovisual litany that vision is necessarily just one thing occurring across a universalized eternity. In taking a “view from the bottom,” Hoang foregrounds an “open ended”64 answer to the trouble posed to existing liberal theoretical frameworks by subjection, abjection, and bottoming as they come up for gay Asian men. The “open end” is simultaneously a means through which the liberal need for a resolution of “identity” might be left strategically unanswered and a specific reference to a receptive anus contending with the vulnerability of its own position while (or through) deriving pleasure from it. Extending this approach further, I would like to situate Hoang’s ‘open end’ in relation to the ‘open ear’ by returning to the framework of “slutty listening.” “Listening from the bottom” perhaps requires a promiscuously open ear enacting a type of sonic bottomhood, intentionally expansive as it lets in all of the sounds and noise of sex-on-screen.

Although the physical qualities of sound lend themselves towards ephemerality and covert transparency (a form of ghostly opacity), not all forms sound takes enact queer possibility. In fact, some work in the favor of social subjectification rather than its subversion and deconstruction. As is particularly noted in critiques of mainstream pornography aesthetics, sound can act as an overdetermined element of narrative that expects a “lining up” of sonic and visual meanings. Linda Williams

63 Ibid, 103.
64 Ibid, 185.
compares the sonic structure of mainstream porn to that of musicals, based off of the necessity that both center around non-diegetic sounds that often rely on dubbing and other temporal mismatches between spoken words and their points of contact with listener-viewers. This parallel highlights some not-so-subtle production strategies at both artistic sites (geared towards “the purpose of (...) closeness, [an] extra sonic presence of the body [for] greater clarity”). It also makes visible the intentional use of sound across genres to appeal to an audience, using a particular idea of which sonic markers catalyze ‘intimacy.’ Drew Daniel speaks in another way to the production of synchronicity between sonic and visual meanings as he focuses on the pointed deployment of the house track “French Kiss” by Lil’ Louis at his visit to a gay club. Although “French Kiss” does not have lyrical content with which to depict its assumed listener, its sounds operate linguistically as it “hails” (interpellates) its ideal, sex-crazed, visually identifiable, gay male subjects.

Along these lines, although the sounds of sex in porn do not elicit figurative representations, they can accompany tropic, gendered, classed, and racialized representations of character-subjects explicitly presented to cue into sites of widespread sexual and erotic fascination. A good pornographic example of this iteration of interpellative sound, or, sound that “hails,” is in Conditioning White Boys to Good Manners—a mind control porn video directed from white women to white men. Formulated as a second-person address address, the video’s dialogue performs

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66 Ibid, 123.
67 Daniel, ALL SOUND IS QUEER, 3. "At its worst and most alienating, the experience of music generates not belonging, not identity, not community, but an oppressive experience that another 'Lil' Louis, French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, termed 'Hailing.'...Like the beat cop calling us out on the street, the presentation of house music in gay bars performs a similar function of social subjection: Hey you! You are this kind of person! This is your music!"
interpellation in a similarly direct manner to that of Althusser’s cop—the first lines read: “Too many white boys leer at white women. We don’t want you. You don’t deserve us.”

In the register of domination, use of the “you” produces a titillating effect as it hails; the attention implicit in such a diminutive address engenders a tense power dynamic. In this relationship, the undeserving white men are cast in a position of submission to their suddenly superior counterparts, which is presumably pleasurable.

The remainder of the video is framed as a “game” in which the white male viewers are confronted with images of white women with large, apparent breasts (and occasionally exposed, hairless, labia) while receiving directives regarding how white women should be treated before they run off to their preferred black male lovers. Through the language of white male degradation, the video’s dialogue serves to satisfy a white supremacist fear of the hypervirility and perennial sexual availability

68 https://www.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5c54a3423d3b6
of black men while simultaneously erasing the existence of black women within any ‘legitimate’ sexual economy. The video’s dialogue positions black women as superfluous distractions for subservient white men whereas white women are a site of labor through which moral ascendancy might be achieved (“Once the game is over you can go watch interracial porn. But now you have homework.”).

In addition to the video’s scripted language performing a direct interpellation of white male viewers, the vocal timbre of the narrator’s speech performs a self-interpellation of sorts in a manner that reinforces the thematic content of the visuals. Speaking at a rhythmic monotone, the narrator’s voice is decidedly un-human—at the very least, it is the product of a range of digital manipulations on a human voice, although it is highly probable that the sounds are entirely computer generated. The robotic timbre of the woman’s voice heightens the sexualized tension between the general fascination with subservient [white] women—specifically in the domestic realm—and the nature of this narrator’s demands, which defy expectations of submission. Moreover, the consistent and expressly rational tone of the high-pitched voice casts white women as so traditionally desirable that they sonically and symbolically transcend humanity, relegating women of color (black women, in particular) to the distasteful realm of flesh and other ‘despicable’ human pleasures.

In his own work, Hoang describes the sound in martial arts films with an echo of ejaculation, noting the “involuntary eruption of convulsive grunts and wrathful yells” (36) in tandem with the audibly excessive use of overdubbing. He postulates this deployment of sound as providing a parallel between the filmic genre and pornography, or, more specifically, the separate martial arts and porn films of the two Brandon Lees (Brandon Lee the pornstar and Brandon Bruce Lee, son of Bruce Lee).
Hoang also addresses this function of sound in his discussion of accent in pornography exhibiting gay Asian men. In both cases, the sonic details of Hoang’s visual-analytical objects are intended to signify the authenticity of the visual performances, but often highlight their own falsehood or lack.

In his analysis of the gay Asian porn star Brandon Lee, Hoang reconfigures performances of English—as well as vocal “grains” of masculinity/effeminacy—in signaling bottomhood for gay Asian men, positing a theory of “accented pornography” that calls for a “new hearing” as well as “new reading” of pornographic texts. Initially, he observes:

In the context of gay porn, accents constitute a shorthand for depicting a character’s sexual appeal, most significantly, his masculinity quotient: a deep voice in a non-region-discriminable accent that evokes butch, red-blooded, all-American manhood. By contrast, the strong accent of some Asian actors—as aural evidence of their racial/ethnic, class, national, and gender alterity—indexes their exclusion from U.S. gay community membership. Hoang furthers this analysis by specifying storylines including Asian characters wherein the plotline specifically revolves around orientalist fantasies of eastern exoticism and its inability to integrate into American (white) cultural aesthetics. In the realm of accent, this occurs when Asian characters’ slowed and heavily accented performance of the script become what Cindy Patton calls “verbal fetishes,” wherein the sonic delivery of lines reinforce the idea that the subjects have limited facility with the English language. Past these scenarios, Hoang still sees accent as a

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69 Ibid, 63.
70 Ibid, 67.
71 Ibid, 63.
72 Hoang, A View From The Bottom, 63.
73 Ibid, 64.
potential site of resistance in porn, particularly in instances when the visual elements of narrative are eclipsed by voice and soundtrack. He writes, “I contend that it is where the lack of fit between FOB bodies and the generic pornographic soundtrack occurs—the instance when the voice drowns out the image—that possibilities for a different sexual subjectivity begin to emerge. Breaking and entering into dominant fantasies not written by or for him, the FOB immigrant subject effectively reterritorializes, or ‘tape[s] over,’ conventional scenarios with his own, overlapping soundtracks of desire.”

Given Hoang’s call for new listening approaches to porn in the realm of dialogue and vocalization, an enactment of echolocation—close reading practices that key into the material, vibrational, touch-y elements of sound in pornographic videos—exists as an important counter-strategy to the sonic interpellation existent in pornographic representation.

To use Hoang’s language, sonic elements—or noise—in porn have the ability to overwhelm or ‘tape over’ normative readings, effectively overwhelming the semiotic realm with static. What exists in excess of these scenarios are “overlapping soundtracks of desire;” multiplicitous sonic ecologies overwhelming linear formulations of pornographic meaning. Echolocation here serves to illustrate the positioning qualities of sound, i.e. the ways in which physical objects and affective positions within a scene are set in relationship to one another through the vibrational forces that consume them. In the vain of Daniel’s deployment of “Sound of The World,” valences of multispeciality within this framework also reference those elements of sound that are inaccessible to the human ear but similarly produce the soundscapes structuring our lives (and our pornographies). Another word for this

74 Ibid, 65.
approach, to draw on Johnson’s language discussed earlier, might also be sonic or echolocational 
*attunement*; a practice that takes seriously the ways in which embodied knowledge enacts covert resistance to hegemonic narratives and regimes through performance, which navigates the sonic space of the pornographic scene keeping in mind the means through which it is simultaneously being taken apart by the minutiae of sonic affectivities bouncing within it.

For the remainder of the section, I will utilize these strategies to approach two pornographic films within and around the genre of mainstream lesbian porn. The first film, titled *Cleaning The Couch, Then Herself*, is a solo masturbation scene within the subgenre of ‘vacuum porn.’ The second, titled *Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines*, is a partnered lesbian scene utilizing a number of powerful sex toys, including a “fucksaw:” a mechanized dildo that takes pleasure and penetration to its extreme. Notably, both videos center encounters with machinery, whose noise grabbed me as I sifted through the pornhub archives. The unusual sex toys presented in these films explicitly heighten normative sexual soundscapes with their excessive buzzing and screeching. Whereas vibrators are often marketed based off their discreteness and resemblance to “the real thing,” i.e. a biological phallus whose thrusts do rumble, these sex machines operate through a sonically obvious presence. They are by no means “natural” or “realistic,” rather, they provide pleasure uncannily. They also draw explicit attention to the realm of fantasy in pornographic narrative, as the scenes operate largely through their uncanny relationships to “real life,” or perhaps simply plausible sexual encounters. Through close readings, I will engage these films on the terms of what their formal structures are doing and
particularly what sound is doing to and for them on the terms of queering the presumed dynamics set forth through narrative.

I initially chose to focus on lesbian films after having a conversation with an acquaintance about our porn watching habits. In the exchange, she asserted that it “must be hard” for me to watch (presumably mainstream) lesbian films—as opposed to independent heterosexual content—because of their heavy reliance on the ‘male gaze,’ even given the void of male performers or (although not always) narratives surrounding men. Importantly, this person’s analysis of the genre implies a wholly interpellative setup in which the totality of the male gaze—by which I assume she meant an objectifying visual focus on ever-available women’s bodies—completely obscured any potential for pleasure among non-male viewers. Here, men also exist without particular reference to racial category, although I would further specify this gaze to include “white” as a prefix, given the particular consumptive practices through which white men (as well as white women) fetishize and consume women of color. In this context, ‘the male gaze’ was something that I categorically could not enact or embody, despite having my own set of interpellative, objectifying, power-wielding potential viewing practices. Additionally, what had become ‘the male gaze’ could not exist within the same space as “bottom”-oriented pleasure.

Such a critique of porn mobilized through the spectre of the male gaze—devoid of any specifying prefix—is not new. In fact, it is one of the driving forces of many self-proclaimed feminist porn projects whose aims are to reciprocally shift the direction of gaze (and thus the power dynamics associated with it) through representation. Erika Lust, a production company run by filmmaker Erika Lust (who also pointedly displays her gender studies degree on the company’s “About” page),
champions a feminist response to “chauvinistic and tacky mainstream porn”\textsuperscript{75} by facilitating the enactment of a “female gaze”\textsuperscript{76} in pornographic representation. Lust positions a shift in viewership as the “fix” to porn’s ‘ethics’ problem,\textsuperscript{77} wherein the negative labor conditions of porn (and the patterns of sexual and economic exploitation of porn actors) are lumped in with the genre’s low budget aesthetics. This rhetoric removes high-budget media production from the scrutiny of ethical labor politics and classifies “tackiness” through a perceived proclivity for violent action, demarcated here through the language of “chauvinism.”

Through a fixation on gaze—and through a conflation of gaze with a totalizing set of prescriptive ethical concerns—Lust repeats the critical moves noted by Kipnis that align low-brow culture with ‘low-class people’ and in turn fulfill anti-black and anti-poor rhetorics about the nature of proclivity towards violent action. If the old guard of the “male gaze” represents a universally oppressive mode of embodiment, viewership, and fantasy, Lust’s answer is a binaric inversion of this order that relies on the stable category of “female” to assuage the violence of

\textsuperscript{75} Erika Lust Website “About”  
\textsuperscript{76} More info about Erika Lust’s description of the female gaze on Netflix show  
\textsuperscript{77} I put the quotations here not to question whether or not porn has an ethics problem, but rather to destabilize the question of “ethics” as it is situated unevenly in relation to pornographic production when tasked the issue of ethical labor politics. There is no question that sex workers across fields of work—in porn or through escorting, camming, or other transactional sexual-emotional encounters—are subject to a unique slew of systemically fraught conditions that devalue their labor and threaten their lives. However, I find that the sole use of the framework of ‘ethics’ in regards to porn (and particularly, porn as a form of sex work) often serves to further distance sex work from discussion of ‘legitimate economies’ and from radical economic strategies that are employed in other instances of physical and economic exploitation, which certainly are not unique to the porn industry. By refraining from addressing the “labor exploitation issue” within the porn industry, Lust and others intellectually distance the movement for sex worker justice (even as, in Erika Lust’s case, they actively support sex work and queer justice causes monetarily and in other ways) from other types of exploited physical labor and reinscribe the forms of morality-based judgements that diminish the legitimacy of sex work in the first place.
permanently one-sided sexual consumption through venusian—even motherly\textsuperscript{78}—approaches to pornographic representation. Female and Male become mutually exclusive and distinct positions that infer static allotments of power, without note of the construction of these categories through race, among other factors that supplant their fixedness. Importantly, nowhere in this equation is “gaze” itself problematized as a multiplicitous act. Additionally, the company shows no interest in reparative strategies for seeking pleasure from the power dynamics of sight\textsuperscript{79} (particularly from the position of those on the bottom) rather than engaging a futile (and, from my perspective, decidedly un-sexy) attempt at eliminating them all together.

Authenticity of representation—an important tributary of the female gaze—is of deep concern for Lust, who also critiques the lack of “real lesbians” in the archive of “mainstream porn” depicting lesbian sex. On the page for the compilation “Girl on Girl,” the description bemoans the state of the genre: “It’s a well-known fact that most mainstream porn is abundant with lesbian films that don’t feature, y’know, real lesbians. Welcome to another world; full of women who love other women, bisexual

\textsuperscript{78} In the pilot episode for the Netflix series “Hot Girls Wanted: Turned On,” Lust gives an interview in which she stresses the importance of ethical porn projects by calling to mind how dangerous it would be if her own children had access to the broad archive she identifies as mainstream porn, which she would not like to be their first teacher about sex. Although it is true that many porn films lend themselves simply to damaging normative readings, Lust’s invocation of the susceptibility of own children calls to mind Lee Edelman’s anti-social critique in \textit{No Future} of the mobilization of “the [white, heterosexual, normative] child” as a symbolic force through which oppressive formulations of futurity gain salience: “Fuck the child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”

\textsuperscript{79} Here, power dynamics refers to broad social subjectification drawn out through the categories of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and others, as well as to much more situational and interpersonal experiences of power dynamics that respond to these categories in a variety of ways. An example of the latter might be the relationship between an artist and their model; although this relationship, as all are, is deeply inscribed through the identitarian positionality of those involved, it also provides a pre-existing script of power-through-gaze (i.e., the power to gaze - unfettered - upon someone else and the position of receiving this gaze, regardless of the pleasure or monetary compensation involved).
women, sexually fluid women and just women just doing it for themselves." In the world of “mainstream porn,” by this account (otherwise identified here through minimal attention to aesthetic detail and low production value), the women on film—even those engaging in work for pay—are not and could not be doing it ‘for themselves.’ Rather, they are false performers whose only purpose revolves around their usage by male producers and the leering eyes of the male viewers they anticipate. They are doing it for the selfish accumulation of money or because they are being exploited—no third option. Similar to the supposition that porn devoid of the “female eye,” “female touch,” or—of course—“female gaze,” is characteristically unfit for consumption by women, this critique implies that the highest forms of pleasure for those who wish to consume lesbian content are only available through the consumption of the “real thing,” i.e. people whose desires match up cleanly, constantly, and legibly with their performances.

The tension between “real” and “fake” pleasure seems to be a calling card for renewed debates surrounding porn within feminist and queer communities, including and in excess of Erika Lust. I am approaching the genre of mainstream lesbian film specifically because of its tendency and ability to trigger questions of authenticity. Given anxieties about “real-ness,” a pornographic sub-genre whose relationship to “evidence” is already more tenuous than others is an ideal position from which to consider the stakes of authenticity and the pleasure that might linger in even the most exaggerated, or even hyperbolic, sexual situations. In particular, the double-receptivity of much lesbian porn (which is to say, two vaginas) complicates the

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80 https://erikalust.com/lustcompilations/girl-girl-lesbian-collection/
question of “proof” of sexual gratification present in other porn genres. Gratification here pointedly signifies the focus on ‘finishing’ present in pornography, wherein climax is the utmost form of pleasure. Porn’s reliance on sex-as-narrative relies more on cumming than erect nipples, for example. If non-male bodies are physically display pleasure differently than penises that get hard, throb, and then ejaculate, the rubrics of proven pleasure shift. In other words, as a broad archive that includes a large quantity of work that does not involve cisgender penises, lesbian porn is under increased pressure to “prove” the arousal of its characters. Often, these videos go above and beyond the expectations of “authentic” arousal to be sure the point gets across, leaving the genre well within the aesthetic realm of Camp. Excess, exaggeration, and hyperbole abound.

Given these conversations, I am approaching the videos in this section with the following questions: how are the dynamics of a perceived oppressive gaze being complicated through sound? How might sonic spatial ecologies help in navigating pathways towards pleasure? What might an imaginative, camp-y, approach to pornography through sound mean for the presumed-as-fixed identitarian and sexual positions in these films, and how might this complicate the languages through which

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81 This is stated with the caveat that not all lesbian porn includes two vaginas, and, in fact, much does not. However, lesbian penises - fleshy, “biological” penises and a variety of dildos, strap-ons, and anthropomorphized phallic toys - exist within overarching narratives and expectations of “receptivity,” symbolic and physical, and are in constant relation to expectations that pleasure be traceable or tangible in some way.

82 I use hyperbole here to point towards the commentary provided by exaggerated sexual performances in lesbian film as well as to suggest some intentionality behind their usage. In hyperbole, there are two major modes: aesthesis and poesis. Poesis, intentional hyperbole, is largely available in comedy and in the genre of camp as it is explicitly produced, particularly as a mode of queer cultural production. Aesthesis, which is what I largely note in mainstream porn, is exaggeration that inadvertently exposes the excess of a performance but is not necessarily an intentional aesthetic gesture intended for the purposes of critique or comedy. Notably, both are present in pornographic representation. In lesbian porn, in particular, it is arguable that poesis is used to over-signify vaginal pleasure so as to subvert the issue of
sexual pleasure is capitulated in the first place? I want to approach the genre of lesbian porn film with the constructed impenetrability of “the male gaze” in mind and ask how this barrier might be subverted through sound rather than through a replacement of one site of disembodied vision with another (i.e., “The Female Gaze\textsuperscript{83}). Admittedly, much mainstream porn is often hard for me to watch, in a way that other pornographic sites are not. However, I would rather this genre not be entirely foreclosed as a potential site of pleasure for the bottom-aligned subjects who are relationally positioned as its forever-victims. It also bears noting that I am personally invested in performances of fantastical excess over those of ‘authenticity.’ In other words, I would rather only ever hear fake orgasms than be relegated to a pornographic realm demanding that sex be quiet, soft, and grounded in the world outside the screen in order to be ethical.

\textsuperscript{83} If the Female Gaze is not disembodied in the same way that the Male Gaze is, it exists within a very particular body whose biology inculcates a specific set of aesthetic, political, and fantasy-related characteristics that inevitably do similar work of removing “the gaze” from its specific context.
A solo masturbation scene starring a sexually curious “housewife,”“ Cleaning the Couch, Then Herself” makes pleasure out of women’s sexual performance given the significant absence of a male figure as a demarcated site of desire. The film portrays five and a half minutes of an anonymous woman vacuuming a couch in a presumably domestic space and eventually realizing the vacuum hose’s pleasurable potential. She fashions the vacuum hose as a sex toy, masturbating to a presumed climax before turning the device off and exiting the scene. Contrary to what the title would suggest, the star of the film is not necessarily the “her” referenced in the film’s title; the woman’s counterpart, a hose vacuum, directs the plot of the video.

84 I put “housewife” here in quotes to problematize the way in which this woman is being framed. I chose the language of “housewife” on account of the woman’s presence in a domestic space that she apparently feels comfortable and private in in addition to the visual detail of her wedding ring in the video. It is worth noting that a woman cleaning a domestic space is not necessarily a housewife, and her occupation is never explicitly demarcated. However, the woman’s presence in the domestic space harkens a common pornographic trope of “the housewife,” whose sexual proclivity is uncovered through the course of the film’s
through sonic markers that acoustically perform what Linda Williams calls a “frenzy of the visible,” even in the absence of an ejaculatory climax. The sonic and visual focus placed on the vacuum shifts the spectacle of narrative interest from the desirous domestic figure referenced in the film’s title to an object whose phallic symbolism significantly deviates from the cis-normative functions of a biological penis in other porn. In this sense, the video’s sonic features reveal its unruly characteristics, generating friction against a presumed stable, presumed heteronormative, performative setup.

The scene opens with a diagonal close-up shot set against a beige carpet punctuated by spurts of red: the vacuum at the center of the frame is encased in a cloudy burgundy plastic and a pair of feet in bright red heels peek out at the edge of the screen. These partially rendered feet, cut off by the frame’s edges, are the video’s only initial introduction of the “her” to which its title refers—the bulk of the screen is taken up by the deep red vacuum, wrapped up in a grey hose. As the film begins to focus on the domestic scene as a whole, the woman remains in the edges of the frame. Her naked legs move back and forth with the movement of the hose against a navy couch, which is now the main object on screen. The film moves forward as the woman finishes her vacuum job and, upon sitting down on the couch, gains curiosity about its sucking function. After placing the tip of the hose to her palm a few times to gauge the tool’s intensity, she places it on her labia and begins to masturbate.

The film’s narrative is explicitly structured around the cleaning device’s mechanical functions. After the initial zoom-out from the vacuum machine to its hose, the next two shots entirely exclude the woman’s face and only visually include...
extremities necessary to the operation of the machine. During this introduction, the woman’s presence is only accessible through visual traces found in the bright red of her shoes on the carpet, her neatly manicured hands occasionally revealing the glimmer of a wedding ring on her left ring finger, and the reference to her existence in the film’s title lingering in all caps just below the webpage frame. Importantly, the woman’s sexual performance lacks the ability to drive the narrative through a linear foreplay-to-orgasm structure, which ends up defaulting on the turning on and off of the vacuum to signify the beginning and ends of pleasure. When the woman presumably reaches climax towards the end of the video, her body shakes intensely, suggesting orgasm. Her moans begin to breach the thick sonic field created by the vacuum’s vibrations, however the sounds of her pleasure are far from decisively orgasmic. Deviating from the history of “invisible” vaginal orgasm depicted through sonic markers, these moans require visual corroboration to indicate climax. Moreover, this climax does not conclude the video. Rather, the piece ends as the woman turns off the vacuum and the camera zooms in to its hard shell, confirming the completion of pleasure of this phallus-aligned object.

appeal within the context of the scene.
The prevalence of the vacuum’s visual presence echoes in its sonic role within the film. Together, these two elements work to align the vacuum with the idealized phallus present as a site of narrative fixation in heterosexual porn. Whereas sound in other films operates as a gauge of the characters’ pleasure, specifically for those whose climax does not result in ejaculation, the force of this noise takes precedence—perhaps selfishly—over others, thereby obscuring any pleasure unable to penetrate its dense vibrational force within the scene. The rumbling of the machine is high pitched, consisting of a constant note encased within the vacuum’s wheezes as it comes into contact with the couch and other dust-related obstacles. The scene “turns on” with the machine, whose sounds flood the space and render the human woman almost fully inaudible. The ending of the film mirrors the opening with the descending whirrs of the vacuum turning off, accompanied by an inward zoom ending in an extreme close up of its red plastic shell. The mirroring function of the beginning and end introduces a symmetrical narrative structure. This architecture is enforced through these parallel
sonic and visual cues that not only rely on a clear open and close, but—like a bell curve—require explicit escalation and deescalation of a climax in between the tails.

This symmetrical imperative thus foregrounds sound as a site of consistency and linearity. This deviates from Sterne’s audiovisual litany, wherein sound is a marker of subjectivity rather than a structuring device. Through the sound of the vacuum, the video’s plot becomes more relevant to viewers interested in a build-up followed by climax, in both narrative and physical senses. In this sense, sight and sound work in tandem to significantly, although temporarily, obscure the film’s presumed main focus in favor of a domestic-object-turned sexual. Although the woman’s bodily presence takes up a majority of the screen space during the middle of the video, her visual exclusion from the beginning and end, as well as her lack of sonic presence throughout, significantly minimize her narrative function in the video’s Exposition—Climax—Conclusion plot arc. Given this, the vacuum’s role is paralleled with that of a heterosexual phallus whose performance of pleasure has the visual ability to determine the beginnings and completion of sexual pleasure.

In her book *Hard Core*, Linda Williams briefly considers the phenomenon of sound in porn as it relates to a sexual-gender divide between primarily cisgender men and women. Williams notes a relegation of women’s (vaginal) pleasure to the realm of the sonic, in sharp contrast to the visual focus paid to the stimulation and climax of an ejaculating penis. In Williams’ categorization, women in porn are represented through depth and references to spatiality through sound, whereas men exist on the superficial plane of the visual. This point is corroborated by the audiovisual litany, wherein sound is historically conflated with interiority, “sphericality,” and dimensionality against the backdrop of an impersonal visual realm. In pornography,
this includes cumshots, “money shots” and other visual approaches to the spectacular size and performance of penile arousal. Williams notes that “sounds of pleasure (...) seem almost to flout the realist function of anchoring body to image, halfway becoming aural fetishes of the female pleasures we cannot see.” In *Cleaning the Couch, Then Herself*, the overabundance of sound in fact works to adhere the woman’s bodily functions and performance to the visuals on the screen. Her inconsistent sonic gestures provide more aesthetic effect than an account of her sexual experience and, coupled with the vacuum’s noise, render her pleasure increasingly unclear rather than confirming it. Apart from interspersed giggles amidst the slurping of the vacuum, the woman (and her pleasure) is largely aligned with her own, suddenly muted, image, and the “anchoring” forces referenced by Williams are relegated to those ephemeral and unusual traces of pleasure audacious enough to breach the constant moan of the vacuum.

In the context of the sight/sound dichotomy set up by Williams, *Cleaning the Couch, Then Herself* enacts a biological-gendered inversion that attaches the woman to the superficial depiction of pleasure and identifies the vacuum as a site of “depth” most often aligned with all subjects whose pleasure does not become apparent through ejaculation. The woman is most available in her visual representations and it is trusted that her pleasure is self-evident without consistent sonic confirmation. Sound’s “realist function” in this scene—its anchoring of the plot in a domestic realm and its unwillingness to tone down for ease of pornographic representation—in fact hyperbolizes the sexual scenario with its own excess. Rather than follow through as a phallic facilitator of linear narrative, the vacuum’s noise renders itself vulnerable to

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85 Williams, *Hard Core*, 123.
the woman’s reaction to its own ridiculousness. Certainly, this is not the intended function of a cisnormative, impenetrable, penis.

This scenario could potentially be read another way, that the woman’s pleasure is so great that is has the ability to seep through the dominating noise of the vacuum. As the woman’s skin makes contact with the vacuum and it slips on the folds of her skin, it makes slurp noises similar to queefing. In this sense, the woman’s search for pleasure shifts the sonic dimensions of the vacuum, personalizing its sounds to be more in tune with her bodily experience. Moreover, at times of intense emotion—during her presumed climax and at times when the vacuum’s sounds are particularly excessive—the woman’s moans and laughs become briefly audible in spite of the film’s baseline of noise. By this account, sound in the film would corroborate her invisible pleasure rather than further obscure it. However, I find it significant that the exasperations that pierce the vacuum’s rumbles are so exaggerated that they generally would not be heard in normative sexual encounters. The queef, for example, is historically an undesirable sex sound that serves to embarrass rather than titillate those who come into contact with it. This consideration returns the piece to Sontag’s treatment of camp, wherein she states that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” The sound of the vacuum pushes the woman to a sonic performance that requires excess in order to be recognized at all. If these sounds confirm her pleasure, they confirm a pleasure that explicitly does not fit within the bounds of “realistic” sexual performance and thus breaches any intended realism latent in the film.

86 Sontag, Notes on Camp, np.
The vacuum’s rumbling also might be read as “information” within an information studies framework of “signal to noise.” Terranova’s work, in particular, is helpful here given her imperative that we interact with the *dynamics* of information (“opening up channels, selective targeting, making transversal connections, using informational guerrilla tactics”87). Situated this way, the clearly obstructive and over-the-top sonic force of the vacuum deftly manipulates the “signal to noise” ratio present in the video’s soundscape and in-so-doing generates a new mode of sexual sounding and listening as it obscures its counterpart’s moans. The vacuum’s noise is noteworthy precisely because of its deviation from “strict meaning”—instead of communicating a clear message, it makes visible the channels through which the scene might otherwise be communicating a legible “message,” which in this case would otherwise be the woman’s orgasmic moans.

In re-calibrating the sounds of the woman’s pleasure through their dominating presence, the vacuum’s growls corrupt any claims to realness or “depth” of sexual performance that might otherwise be waged under the auspices of an authentic female performance of satisfaction or pleasure. If a common critique of mainstream pornography is its supposedly clear artifice, specifically in the case of women’s orgasmic moans, the “ethical” response (in projects such as Erika Lust’s) has been one of rectifying the artifice with authenticity: Real Female Pleasure (and this does incur cissexist resonances), real women, unified and cleanly exchangeable meaning. By obstructing the channel through which the authenticity of the ‘message’ of pleasure might be verified, the vacuum’s noise puts a filter on what other messages might survive its interference. In some sense, the noise blocks the communicative

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signal just as the playful usage of the vacuum blocks its utility as an object of work. In the video, the sounds that most effectively avoid total corruption by the vacuum’s growls are laughs. A site of serious, linear pleasure is thus transformed into an experience of campy excess with minimal attachment to visual or sonic expectations of the “truth” of a female orgasm. This, in turn, leaves the placement of “pleasure” up to the interpretation of the viewer.

Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines

Figure 10. Fucking Machines, Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines, 2014.

Whereas the narrative of Cleaning the Couch, Then Herself relies on a linear plot sequence revolving around one orgasm, bracketed by the switching on and off of the vacuum, Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines is a multi-climactic video structured around a series of five short scenes. The video opens mid-climax in a
room whose mise-en-scene echoes that of an unmarked military “testing facility” or a
villain’s lab in a low-budget science fiction film. The room has a rounded ceiling,
blue strip lights, and cement floors. The single piece of furniture in the room is metal
bed frame on which one of the “sluts,” ‘the squirter,’ is positioned on a wand vibrator
permanently affixed to a wooden board. She sits above a puddle of what we might
presume to be squirt from previous climaxes while the other slut, fully clothed, kneels
beside the bed wearing a clear construction mask, in anticipation of squirt. As the
scenes progress, the sluts encounter a variety of other sex machines that become
increasingly phallic in nature. The film ends not with climax, but with the two of
them receiving penetration from “fucksaws” side by side, moaning ecstatically.
Throughout the video, the physical relationships between the two women’s bodies are
significantly determined through the sounds of the machines they encounter.
Moreover, their hyperbolic performances of pleasure—in tandem with the supra-
natural characteristics of the sex machines—critically shift the presumed “sight”
versus “sound” dynamic of orgasmic experience, abandoning any pornographic
investment in “real” performance.

Before considering the video’s noise, I would like to consider the speech of
the title. The piece’s title leads in two directions, contingent upon a dual reading of
the word “fucking” as an individual adjective adjective or as a part of the noun
“fucking machines.” In the first potential reading, the word “fucking” is a diminutive
used to describe the sluts’ machines. (As in, “the sluts have gone at with those fucking
machines again). In the second, wherein “fucking” is part of a noun, the machines in
question are “fucking machines.” This reading of the title alludes to the presence of a
variety of sex rigs, automated devices whose machinistic qualities remove them from
the realm of “vibrators” or even, more broadly, “sex toys.” Moreover, similarly to the terminology of the “housewife” in *Cleaning The Couch, Then Herself*, the terming of the women as “sluts” explicitly, perhaps self-consciously, invokes traditional pornographic tropes that inform a reading of the women’s performances of pleasure. The subsumption of the women’s activities into the trope of “the slut” calls to Susan Sontag’s appraisal of the genre of Camp, that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role.”

It is unlikely that the phrase “slut” explicitly refers to the women’s positionality as sex workers engaging in pay for pornographic performance. However, the phrase implicates them in a broader archive of pornographic representation that purposefully exaggerates “sluttiness” as a way to engage fantasies surrounding taboo sexual promiscuity. As the sluts engage in intense physical activity, they are simultaneously riffing off of the role of “slut.” Their “being,” in this sense, revolves around the artifice associated with this broader trope, rendering Camp in the recognition that the “slut” narrative precedes the “sluts” on screen.

It is particularly through the lens of camp that I would like to read the “fucking machines” present in the video. Later in her “Notes on Camp,” Sontag asserts that camp “is the love of the exaggerated, the "off," of things-being-what-they-are-not.” In the second, fourth, and final scenes, the women are penetrated by naturalistic dildos attached to rods that vigorously thrust back and forth. The dildo’s veins suggest a direct correlation to biological penises; they “are” phallic devices aligned with biological functions. However, the sounds of the devices are clunky and

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machinic. They buzz, click, and rumble. Perhaps even more noticeably, their intense motions inflect the women’s moans of pleasure. In reaction to the thrusting of the fucksaws, the sluts’ voices suddenly jerk and vibrate robotically as they reach climax. In sum, the performances associated with these devices could only be machine-related; they reflect the force, consistency, and electrical power of man-made sex devices that exceed the consumer dildo or vibrator.

By contrast, a human hand (This image sticks, considering Hoang’s claim that hands are organs of “love and labor.”90) lingers in the corner of a number of the scenes as an operator of the machines. In the second scene, it administers a mechanized dildo attached to a gun-like device. In the final scene, it rests gently on a powerbox connected to a thrusting rod. The unaffected and thematically un-implicated hand provides a reference of what “natural,” resting bodies might look like outside of the scene. It serves a sharp contrast to the aggressive, nonhuman, jerks of the phallic objects it operates. Its presence amplifies the extent to which the fucking machines are “being-what-they-are-not,” exposing their artifice without minimizing any of the pleasure they provide to the two women. Rather than devalue the whole film, the hand in fact facilitates the process of pleasure-through-fakery.

Aside from the machines’ buzzing and jumping, the quality of the sluts’ vocal performances themselves significantly shift the function of the video. Unlike the muted vocality of the woman in Cleaning The Couch, the performers in this series of scenes are excessively vocal. One, in particular, wails operatically through her orgasms, her voice undulating in a piercing vibrato. She continually screams, wails, and exclaims “oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck!!!” When read through the framework

90 Ibid.
of hyperbole, this over-the-top performance might be read as a swerve of the
convention that vaginal orgasm be “proven” through sound, or that exaggerated
performance is necessarily aligned to something “fake.”

Roger Mathew Grant defines hyperbole as a force that “lies in order to tell the
truth,” specifically through “inflammation or diminution.”91 Although the
performance is aligned with traditional porn aesthetics’ inclusion of ‘obviously fake
orgasms,’ the woman’s squirting counters the assumption that she is in any way lying.
Rather, as she convulses in pleasure, emitting a series of yells and whines, she severs
the relationship between excess and fakery that is used to aesthetically and ethically
condemn mainstream pornography. If her vocal performance is “fake,” which it still
could be, it is certainly not getting in the way of her climax. As such, the hyperbolic
bounds of her vocal performance pose a critique to demands that orgasm in
mainstream porn be “more naturalistic,” particularly those that do so as an ‘ethical
imperative.’ It also troubles the assignment of the phrase “fake” in relationship to
other non-ejaculatory orgasms that sound similar to her own exclamations from the
throes of passion.

The sonic dimensions of the women’s multiple orgasms are particularly
salient given the video’s focus on squirting, an ejaculatory act. Arguably, the visuality
of squirting further complicates the association of vaginal pleasure with sonic
performance. Although both women squirt, one does so with much more visual force
than the other. Each ejaculation sends large amounts of liquid propelling out of her
vagina and into the scene. Throughout the different clips, her counterpart is
positioned as an active recipient of her squirt, shielded behind clear plastic that

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90 Hoang, *A View From The Bottom*, 138.
visibly exhibits the liquid dripping down it. The squirting is primarily framed visually, in a similar manner to the traditional “money shot” of male ejaculation. In the second scene, for example, the non-squirter receives penetration from a fucksaw while tucked inside of a clear dome structure. Simultaneously, the second “slut” sits on top of the dome, her ass and vagina in direct view of the other woman through the plexiglass. The non-squirter’s feet come into contact with the squirter’s bare legs through this clear boundary wall, in a manner similar to the way in which movies depict touching moments through the placing of hands in-line with each other on both sides of a glass surface.

The showcasing of vaginal ejaculation troubles the assumption that all vaginal pleasure is “invisible,” or does not have visual parallels to phallic arousal. Moreover, the visual economy of the sluts’ squirt renders their screams of pleasure superfluous as a means of evidencing their climax. The continued presence of over-the-top moans might be read as a misogynistic impulse to forcefully align women’s experiences of pleasure with excess. However, I would like to read this performance as an intentional approach at pleasure through excess rather than in spite of it. Particularly as other elements of the scene rely on an explicit separation of “reality” from “artifice,” i.e. the lingering human hand operating the fucksaws in the corner of the screen, the one-off clip of one of the women performing fellatio on the other without using any toys, this “excess” might be understood for the ways in which it is purposefully inserted into the film to celebrate the dramatic edges (peaks?) of pleasure.

91 Grant, Roger Mathew, The History of Extra, or the Sound of Hyperbole in Three Scenes, 2.
In Two Sluts Squirt All Over Their Fucking Machines and Cleaning The Couch, Then Herself, sound toys with performances of “authentic pleasure” by interfering with and dramatically shifting the channels through which it is communicable. The vacuum inserts itself into the woman’s performance of pleasure, entering the scene as an uncanny phallus and obscuring the question of pleasure-authenticity with its sonic excess. The machinic noises permeating both videos force themselves into spheres where they are otherwise unwanted, asking that viewers listen for pleasure, touch, and narrative in new ways. To draw from Halberstam’s language regarding queer failure, I would argue that the obvious artifice of the sounds in these videos—the moans and their machinic counterparts—exhibit a type of “failure” at performing “naturalistic” pleasure. However, rather than detract from the sex appeal of the videos, this failure takes pleasure in its own excess. The performances lean further into the fantastical elements of pornography that are often mobilized as “evidence” of its reliance on misogynistic gender roles. As such, the performances demonstrate a means through which critical emphasis on sonic receptivity might reroute normative experiences of pornography and their implications on “identity” and “sexuality.” The sounds of pleasure resist static alignments of masculinity, visuality, and penile ejaculation. In so doing, they facilitate cross-gender identifications that toy with binaric gender-sexual positions rather than steadfastly affirming them, as well as shifting notions of the pornagraphic “utility” of sight and sound.
Figure 11, Tee Vee Dinner, *Queen Bee Empire*, 2014.

**ENDURING ORNAMENTS: NOISY EXPERIMENTAL PORNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES**
Finally, I would like to gesture towards four other experimental approaches to the sounds of sex as they encounter, deviate from, and brush up against mainstream narratives. At these sites, “noise” becomes an explicit component of the works’ form; the videos take into account what is visually, sonically, and texturally lingering in the materials (or carrying over from past forms) and in doing so contend with What’s Haunting Porn, both materially and on the grounds of narrative. Notably, each of the videos—including *Enduring Ornament*—utilizes materials from existing pornographic sites, whether they be visual, sonic, or broader pornographic conventions. The artists take a variety of approaches to the types of sonic details I have been attuning to within the pornhub ‘archive,’ i.e. the amalgam of video works that, through a number of pathways, have found themselves on a mainstream distribution platform.

By focusing on intentional remixes of pornographic works, I hope to put the pornhub archive in relation with explicit artistic practices of attunement that consider similar questions of pornographic autonomy, authenticity, and semiotic malleability. Moving forward from a brief survey of contemporary mainstream works, I am providing these experimental video pieces to give another idea of where echolocational or slutty listening practices might come into play in experimental arenas, what the “new possibilities” of porn and sound might look/feel/listen like, and to further problematize “porn” (sans prefix) as a distinct genre with particular aims or even aesthetic conventions. Leaning into the cultural collapse of sex into its representations, these videos reroute linear formulations of sex-on-screen by reconstituting the bodies, spaces, and sensorial worlds that subsume them.
“Enduring Ornament,” the 16mm piece by M. M. Serra (in collaboration with Josh Lewis) for which this section is titled, merges sonic materiality with visual materiality through its self-conscious use of degraded filmic source materials alongside non-linear sonic source materials in its exploration of “the bodily spectacle.” The video sources imagery from a number of 16mm filmstrips “found outside of a closing adult bookstore on New York’s former 42nd Street sex district,” blurring the visual legibility of the original content through chemical alterations. The ethereal, even ghostly, contents of Enduring Ornaments remark simultaneously upon the material leftovers of the degradation of film and on the traces left behind by histories of cruising that gentrification and government crackdowns on sex work have attempted to erase. The imagery moves between the degraded found footage and text slides with the compound word poetry of Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, explicitly connecting the reassembled video segments to amalgamated words meant to arouse associations with the subconscious.

92 Film Makers’ Coop
93 Ibid, video synopsis.
In this piece, the visual “noise” of the degraded film might be read sonically. The video’s sounds are not explicitly sexual and, in fact, they have natural resonances. The soundtrack flits between submersive audioscapes that include the sounds of running water, of birds vaguely chirping, and of overlapping exhalations of air, and punctuating snaps that accompany the poetry sections. The audioscapes are particularly of interest in this video, situating the found footage in “found sound” of a type. The sounds shift throughout the piece, incorporating different traces of water, film static, and short synth interludes that give the soundtrack a particularly melancholic tone. The sound hiccups occasionally, leaving blips of silence that are eventually filled back up. Particularly at the offset of the video, the black spots of degradation (where the film has been entirely burned through) bouncing around the frame move in sync with the accompanying soundscape, aligning the visual “noise”
with the abstract auditory background. As the film progresses and the bodies on screen become increasingly illegible, the audioscape thins out.

The final few minutes consist solely of water dripping, small clicks and squeaks, and occasional breaths of air. The bodies become formless blobs, folding into each other and mutating in a similar manner to the ink blots of a rorschach test. In this sense, the video’s sound haunts its imagery. Both are “enduring ornaments” of a type. The audioscapes and their visual parallels shifts the focus of the found footage from the sexual availability of the women being portrayed. Instead, the primary content is the primordial figurations of the film’s bodies within a visual and sonic economy steadfastly located in nature: among bugs, water, and birds. This is not to say that the video is no longer “sexy” or interested in sex appeal. In fact, the traces of seduction are still present in the sensual gestures of the disembodied limbs that remain visible. Rather, the collaboration of the audioscape with the degradation of the film seeks sex appeal in a realm that exists past the decay of the normatively constructed physical body.

**Baba De Perico (Parrot's Saliva)**

For one-and-a-half minutes, Ximena Cuevas fills a camera’s (and viewer’s) field of vision with a softly focused VHS tape close-up of an unidentified mouth and lips opening and closing. The perspective of the camera situates the viewer in direct proximity to the lips on screen, which softly reenact the motions of kisses as a tongue makes coy gestures towards the camera and the screen is periodically enveloped in the darkness of an entirely open mouth. The mouth ebbs and flows in its visibility and
closeness to the filmic apparatus, sometimes leaving the camera—and viewer—in a state of total darkness, only informed by the static of the video medium. The footage accompanies a series of gasps and moans, described on the page of the video’s distributor as “the sounds of lovemaking.” Lovemaking here has specific linguistic resonances—it is not “sex,” it is not “fucking,” it is not “fellatio” or “cunnilingus” (it is not even “making-love”!). “Lovemaking” is a reformulation of words that generally remain apart but in this instance switch places and join-at-the-hip, allowing the word to roll smoothly off the tongue as do the acts it is presumably signifying. The word drips with crushed velvet and champagne, and is underscored by the video’s soft jazz soundtrack with piano, bass, and a clarinet or saxophone. It is all very “classy,” “sexy,” and perhaps somewhat over-the-top. The vocal utterances range in tonality but share an underlying quality of breathiness that signify ‘softcore’ sexual acts. The video is not classified as explicitly pornographic because of its lack of explicit visual representations of sex and its relative sonic simplicity, however it is clearly about sex. It is described as “a soft-porn video on how easy it is to get porn.”

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94 Video Data Bank
The sonic cues used in this video serve as an example of easily identifiable “sex sounds” that clash against relationship to the video’s visual a-referentiality. In this sense, the role of sound in this context clarifies the sonic constituency of pornographic representation. Ximena Cuevas engages a viewer in their own associations with sex and sound through a limited use of visual cues. The question is posed as to whether or not the “softcore” sonic sexual signifiers will be received universally as pornographic, if they will be understood, and to what extent they will
generate meaning for those who are taking them in. Through her use of blurry and repetitive visual imagery, Cuevas destabilizes the notion that pornographic representation is solely constituted through its visual signifiers. Additionally, the use of a soft-jazz soundtrack exaggerates cultural symbols surrounding sex and in-so-doing calls attention to the ways in which listening practices around sex are subject to similar social determinations as are visual cues. Sound is not necessarily a deep, bodily, intimate, phenomena that reigns in superficial and negative pornographic visual representations. Rather, it has the ability to exist on a similar level of superficiality or “easy-to-get-ness” as does the visual realm, and this superficiality is still sexy as it is culturally overdetermined.

**Queen Bee Empire**

*Queen Bee Empire* begins without dialogue as the video emits a series of high pitched giggles. A voice exclaims “get all those little piggies!,” as the screen displays close-ups of a set of painted fingernails tickling someone’s foot. The scene immediately cuts to another character alone in the shower, rubbing suds across her naked body, giving an off-key rendition of “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” As the two scenes (a sub/dom BDSM sex scene and a cheeky, if not explicitly ‘sexual,’ domestic scene) cut back and forth between one another, the sounds of the shower begin to inflect the partnered sex scene. The hissing of water makes a smooth transition to its close sonic neighbor, the sound of sheets rustling, chaperoned by the aural fuzz of a lo-def recording device. Otherwise stated, it is easy to watch the BDSM scene and come to the conclusion that, somewhere nearby, the shower is still running. Sound
cuts across time and space, implying simultaneity of the two scenes whose content and contexts might otherwise be read as being at odds. The sonic similarities between sheets and shower are not established right away, allowing both of the sites of pleasure to be established separately before they are re-assembled together through sound. BDSM is put into proximity with the domestic realm, troubling the sanitization of the domestic against the villainization of non-normative sex practices. Lacey, the scene’s dom, notices healing bruises on her sub as she takes out the paddle; BDSM in this sonically-blurred context becomes as quotidian as taking a shower, no longer a silenced dynamic of the day-to-day.

Figure 14. Tee Vee Dinner, Queen Bee Empire, 2014.

Queen Bee Empire is a full length (55 minute) hard-core pornographic video by “Tee Vee Dinner,” otherwise known as Samuel Shanahoy. After the video’s shower-scene introduction, it moves through a number of sexual plots, loosely following the romantic coming (cumming) together of Tracy (the character from the
shower scene) and their Mall Crush From The Fish Taco Stand, Macy. The two meet at a pool party and immediately hit it off, later sharing a solo session at Kacey’s slumber party. If the mainstream lesbian films I engaged with earlier are evidence of hyperbole that does not attempt an explicit auto-critique, *Queen Bee Empire* enacts hyperbole through “poesis,” i.e. a purposeful poeticization of hyperbolic aesthetics. The video merges a number of scenes performed by its cast, climaxing during “The Witching Hour” at a sexy sleepover held at “666 Beaver Lane.” The piece utilizes over-the-top visual aesthetics and set design to poke fun at itself, using bright colors and gaudy details—lots of pink, costume jewelry, decadent junk food in a variety of artificial hues—to explicitly cue into the kitschy world wherein the characters live.

The hyperbole of the video’s visual realm bubbles over into its sounds. The main characters’ names, Kacey, Macy, Lacey, and Tracy, ring together nasally, invoking the giggles of a high school cheersquad. (Somewhere nearby, the antagonists from *The Princess Diaries* call with a cheery uptick as they perform an impromptu cheer before first period: “Hey-There Ho-There how-do-you-do? This is Grove Live saying Hi to YOU! I’m: lanA! , ANnA! , FONTANA!”). The characters speak with valley girl accents amidst the gloomy setting of the Pacific Northwest, overlaying the residue of heterosexual, palm tree laden, teen dramas against a variety of queer relational contexts. During an outdoor pool scene, a high-femme cast engages in various sex acts in an above-ground pool (lots of squealing, squeaking, splashing, laughing), only to discover a peeping tom lurking with binoculars in the nearby hedges. One of them approaches the offender, using a high-pitched, nasal drag to ask: “You like spying? You like watching titties bounce around?” The peeping tom, Randy, responds with a direct quotation of the Hole song “Doll Parts”: “But, I
wanna be the girl with the most cake..!”). Directly afterwards, Randy’s fake moustache is ripped from their upper lip and their clothes stripped off. Here, the nasal drag of up-talk and other traditionally feminized vocal patterns are paralleled with the materially flimsy (as in, it comes right off) gender performance of Randy’s fake moustache. Excess interweaves the two potential sites of gender identification—the “valley girl” accent and the fake moustache—pointing to an inauthenticity of both modes of performance as well as gender performance as a broader phenomena.

The nasal quality of the high femme vocal performances is also granted the same materiality as the moustache itself. In other words, sonic vocal performance is an accessory that might be adhesively tacked on, similar to the synthetic fibers of prop facial hair. Importantly, the flimsiness of the vocal performance and the adhesive of the moustache is not incompatible with pleasure, nor is it presented as an ‘unacceptable’ form of gender performance. The valley girl accents are still only employed by the video’s high-femme characters (less so by butch, low femme, and androgyne characters) and Randy’s moustache is aligned with their performance of masculinity. In this sense, the hyperbolic employment of both archetypal ‘gender-signifiers’ points back towards their excess in traditional heterosexual contexts. However, the video repurposes these vestiges of normative heterosexual gender regimes within a queer context, hyperbolizing them with pleasure in mind. The high femme vocal performance has the end result of a specifically queer femininity in this context, and Randy presumably enjoys wearing the moustache as they enjoy it being stripped off.

Later in the video, sound performs another pleasurable critique of gender through the low rumble of Macy (Mall Crush From The Fish Taco Stand)’s Hitachi
wand. As she prepares for the Big Slumber Party, Macy can’t help but get excited about her new crush, Tracy. Pulling out the powerful vibrator, she begins to masturbate. At this point, the video begins cutting between shots of her on the bed and footage of her fantasies, taking the viewer to the sites of Macy’s excitement and then back to fixate on her once more. Partway through the masturbation session, Macy begins to fantasize about a butch couple giving each other a haircut. The buzz of the vibrator remains static, although as the image shifts from Macy to the Haircut scene, it becomes analogous to the sounds of the hair buzzer dutifully shaving off chunks of bright green hair that fall onto a DIY denim vest. In this sonic gesture, the video effectively “queers” the domestic apparatus of the hair buzzer. The scene inflects the machine’s ‘buzz’ with associations to lesbian body modification practices and then further situates these practices within the context of queer sexual practices, grounded in the Hitachi wand. By calling upon the elements of sound (and, in this case, machine noises that are often derided in the consumer objects they come from...i.e., the distinct volume of a hair cutter or vibrator isn’t generally a selling point) that can read multiple physical contexts into any given auditory detail, the video opens up the potential for a queer economy of (household) objects. In this sense, queer sexual fantasies, histories, and practices are given the opportunity to hide in plain sight.
Initially, I had hoped to submit this video as a “production thesis” in addition to this written piece. However, this was deemed a non-viable option given Wesleyan University’s precedent revolving around student-produced sexual and pornographic work. Given that I was not in a position to proceed with the production project under the guise of my thesis, I was told that I could include sound from the piece (sans visuals) and/or write about my experience producing it in the absence of submitting the full video work. I find this experience significant here for two major reasons among a number of others. Firstly, this process resonates with Halperin and Hoppe’s identification of “The War on Sex” by exposing the anti-sex work position of the university under the guise of “humanitarian” or “anti-sex trafficking” alignments. These are exhibited elsewhere through the criminalization of commercial sex work facilitated by the recent SESTA-FOSTA, i.e. the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act. The University’s explicit concern in these matters is one of subjects’ safety, however this rhetoric masks anxieties about bad publicity and, in my case in particular, actively blocks the facilitation of sex and sex-work positive projects centered around marginalized approaches to sex and pornography. Secondly, these constraints dichotomize pornographic sound (and by extension, language surrounding pornographic works and activity) and pornographic visuals within the context of a conversation assessing which will be more of a “threat” to The University, reinforcing the strong relationship between institution and its understanding of visuality. It would not have meant less to me to turn the sound in on its own, however the university’s understanding of a significant different between the sounds and images of sex points to an institutional structuring of sex that prioritizes visual representation. This leads me to two conclusions regarding potential un-doings of the
Finally, I would like to turn to my own work. The full piece, titled *A Long Undressing*, is an experimental queer pornographic video work recently made in collaboration with Julissa Ramirez. The piece was shot on VHS and a handheld digital video recorder. It lasts five minutes in its current iteration, encompassing two narratives that feed into one another through shifting encounters with voyeurism. Scene 1 opens the film with a solo masturbation scene to which the viewer is invited through introductory wide shots of the actress performing a seductive dance in the window of her apartment, explicitly performing for an audience. The scene ends with her turning on a television. The screen blips a quick sharp white as the image folds outwards, turning on to “turn on.” This leads into the content of the second scene, a scenario played out between two artist models. Because the human-models cannot fully exist within the role of still object-of-study, tension exists within each breath and small movement that gives way to their fleshy form: they return the artist’s directed stare, their stillness is unpredictable and unruly (...bratty?). In this transition between scenes, the masturbator is both themselves and a symbolic reflection of the position of the viewer, who has otherwise been relegated to the voyeuristic role of the camera. An act of voyeurism multiplies the lines of narrativity moving the plot “forward.”

"hegemony of optics." Firstly, it shows sound to be a covert means through which institutional anti-sex and anti sex work frameworks might be troubled. Secondly, it simultaneously shows the tumultuous relationship between the institution and visual imagery. Although Wesleyan University privileges image-media in this context (i.e. in this case it is more likely to provide scrutiny to image-based work), its explicit discomfort with the “wrong” types of visual imagery surfacing in its presence are also indicative of a vulnerability to visual media, which resonates with Haraway and Nash’s continued interest in the visual as a platform for politically subversive work.
In a visual register, *A Long Undressing* uses gaze as a medium for pleasure as it fixates on different modes and positionalities of watching, peering, and receiving the look of another person. The viewer exists simultaneously in these spaces, an embodied force at the scene of sexual activity whose presence is forged and suggested through camera angles making explicit the voyeurism of the filmic mechanism. The viewer also leaks into the performance space through strategic movement between close-up shots and wide angles (as well as hand-held and static camera shots), and references to gaze (reciprocated and otherwise) within the different plots themselves. Within a plot structure circumscribed through gaze, Julissa and I were interested—perhaps counterintuitively—in multi-dimensionalizing the process of looking by situating it within the sensorially rich experience of performing sex acts.

This approach took an explicitly sonic focus during the editing process, through which we rerouted normative representations of sex and, specifically, orgasm, by exploding their linear structure from within. Rather than utilizing one-to-one sonic representations of the images on screen, we chose to approach the sound separately from the visual materials—hyper-fixating on the practice of “dubbing” often mentioned in critiques of the quality and authenticity of mainstream porn. As Julissa culled and assembled the VHS footage, I sifted through the various sound recordings from set as well as through public domain pornographic videos and ASMR Youtube channels. The resulting soundtrack is a mix of short clips from different sites, some “authentic” to the project and others from elsewhere on the internet. The origins of each sound fade into their amalgamation, which is a matrix of breathy clips punctuated by slaps, squeaks, giggles, and the repetitive utterance of someone
exclaiming “fUckk.!.……” The saliva of kissing and of one person spitting onto another mix together, fabricating a squishy wash of sound that evades a concrete point of origin and, in doing so, leaves the onus of interpretation (or, arousal) to the viewer-listener.

Because neither of the scenes in the video depict visually apparent climactic moments, the sound uses moments of climax and the breathy soundscapes that encase them to multiply the rhythmic flow of the piece, replacing points of visibly available physical climax with points of sonic fixation or punctuation. Rather than attempt to open up the visual sphere with “authentic” depictions of pleasure (that, for example, might parallel an ejaculating penis), the sound exacerbates the mismatch between visual and sonic experiences of pleasure. The VHS noise serves as a sonic background within which other gestures are embedded, contextualizing the more recognizable “sounds of sex” within the space-/non-space of the visual medium itself. The use of the oft-critiqued hyperbole of dubbing inscribes an experience of sexual tension that eludes linear narrative by providing an excess of narrative content. Sounds from prior acts haunt later visual representations, and some sounds give notice of what is to come. The temporal patchwork of sounds fabricates an experience of sex that necessarily exists in other physical and time-based locales, that loops indefinitely before stopping abruptly at the smack of a switch.

This remixing of sexual narratives felt especially important as Julissa and I attempted to push back against other queer and feminist porn projects that aim to ‘queer’ the pornographic ‘genre’ through claims to authenticity: ‘Real queers, real sex
(love, intimacy), real orgasms. Rather than burden the work with the imperative that it represent outside expectations of ‘real’ sex, if there is such a thing, we brought in audio materials that are generally interpreted as “fake.” The assumption of the word “fake” here implies that the sounds are too hyperbolic to exist in embodied, non-directed or representational, life. By drawing from a variety of content sources and temporally displacing the visuals from the video’s soundscape, we hoped to shift expectations of reality in favor of gesturing towards a number (or, perhaps, rather, an infinitude) of simultaneous sexual ‘realities,’ the ‘fake’ no less of a turn-on than the ‘real,’ the ASMR no less viable than the images of “Real Queers” having “Real Queer Sex.” Sex acts haunting sex acts haunting sex acts.

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96 Hoang speaks to the trend towards authenticity in queer videography in *A View From The Bottom* when describing his own artistic practices, specifically in his video *Forever Bottom*. Hoang also notes the role of sound in his own video work, which is used to invoke camp aesthetics and subvert post-stonewall investments in conceptual and moral unity (as well as idealizations of sameness, reciprocity, and mutuality). Hoang sees these investments performed within the ‘gay community’ through “gay affirmative documentary” in the “early years of gay liberation” through the use of coherent voicing (i.e. one clearly spoken voiceover or multiple voices “gathered together”) and narrative. He locates these especially post-AIDS crisis as a means of asserting a politically viable gay identity, however they are certainly apparent in present-day as an extension of gay liberation approaches that center identity politics.

97 There are, naturally, porn genres dedicated to filming couples who have intimate relationships off-screen. But that’s just one type of ‘reality.’ Habituality and off-screen longevity are lovely to behold (and this is to say, of no particular concern as a subgenre of a larger archive dedicated to fantasy), but no less ‘real’ than first-time, on-screen, sex that has been cut up on the basis of a shot-list or that is only happening because the sex-havers are getting paid. Proponents for the paramount reality of “real couples’ sex” perhaps forget that sex happens this way frequently, through the frameworks non-pornographic sex work, and makes up for a huge portion of sexual activity.
In *A Long Undressing*—as well as in the other video works I have addressed across this text—porn performatively “speaks back” to anti-porn feminism and its more recent iteration, sex negativity from the left. Although MacKinnon and Dworkin’s decry against pornography has passed its theoretical heyday, it is revived through calls to authentic sex in pornographic representation. Porn (and, specifically, mainstream porn sites like Pornhub) becomes increasingly scrutinized through the frameworks of identity. Reformists are asking for a shift in the bodies that are represented, rather than in *how* pornography narrativizes sexual practices. The internet abounds with these narratives: they can be found on popular websites like Buzzfeed, as well as those of more niche feminist initiatives. They formulate a pornographic subset called “porn for women,” supposedly distinguished by the
intimacy and realism it depicts. Rather than opening up new potentialities for pornography, calls to authenticity reinforce dichotomies between the “fake” and the “real.” A call for authentic porn is also a call against “fake” porn. To ask that something be “more authentic” does not mean to ask that it be produced with more sincerity, just that it fake the thing a little bit better, in a more respectable mode.\footnote{Hoang gestures towards the difference between sincerity and authenticity in his discussion of the character Anacleto, a Filipino coded-as-queer houseboy in the film \textit{Reflections of A Golden Eye}. In particular, he addresses critiques of the actor’s performance and of the character in general, arguing that it was an impossible, “uninhabitable” character. More specifically, unimaginable that Anacleto be “happy playing house.” In response, Hoang asks: What would constitute a good performance of a Filipino fag then? One whose Filipinoness and faggorty are less over-the-top and more discreet, coded, legible only on the level of connotation? To be sure, such a requirement would amount to the complete erasure of all Filipino screaming queens, on- and offscreen. \textit{A truly queer reading would be attentive to these representational dilemmas, but must also recognize and acknowledge David’s sincere, dignified contribution, that he in fact plays his part extremely well}” (96-7, emphasis added).} Notably, “fakeness” here is often euphemistic for low-brow aesthetics. In the case of Erika Lust, the project’s feminism is deeply entwined with [thing about money and aesthetics]. This mission essentializes “feminine” aesthetic modes while aligning them with high-brow ‘attention to detail’ and high production value imagery.

What’s missing in this emergent feminist approach to porn is an embrace of boundless fantasy. Fantasy might brush up against “the real”—this might even be what’s sexy about it—however, it does not rely on claims to authenticity in order to be ethical, to be pro-sex and pro-sex worker. Juana María Rodríguez quotes Butler’s account that fantasy “allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (29). How else, but through fantasy, might we escape state surveillance, pathologization, and regulation of sex? This escape is evident in the videos above, in the fantasy of two butch lesbians giving each other
haircuts to the buzz of a Hitachi magic wand and in the overwhelming growl of a vacuum hose re-purposed with pleasure in mind.

Noise, of all things, cannot help but be fantastical. Positioned otherwise to ‘sound’ (or, more specifically, to communication and stable meaning), noise requires stepping outside of paradigms obsessed with legibility, authenticity, and stability. Stubbornly, noise lingers in the “semiotic undercommons” of pornographic representation. It buzzes in the areas of pornographic production that are not expected to change alongside shifting representational imperatives, or are only asked to become “more authentic.” By turning towards this noise rather than allowing oneself to be repelled from it—or, in a perhaps more insidious fashion, not listening for it at all—it is possible to shift the frameworks for considering pornography by lingering in what we do not, and cannot, classify. A renewed emphasis on the noisy sonic, in all its falsehood and obscurity, has worldmaking potential.
WORKS CITED


Justin Timberlake. *Futuresex/Lovesounds*, Zomba Label Group, United States.


