

**NoPorn Northampton:**  
**An Interdisciplinary Ethnography Following One City's Struggle with Pornography**  
**by Murial Barkley-Aylmer**

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## **A “Capital” Offense:**

### **An Introduction to NoPorn Controversy**

“Do the things that turn you on hurt other people?” My tongue is tingling, my face scrunching, and I’m glad that I’m alone. “What people fail to realize, Murial, is that our sexual lives do not exist in a moral vacuum. Taking into consideration freedom, privacy, and diversity does not reduce personal responsibility.” I cradle my cell phone between shoulder and chin, scribbling anxiously as Jendi Reiter speaks.

Her husband, Adam Cohen, is on the line as well. “People ask us, ‘what’s the point? Why not focus on something more substantial—global warming, the Bush administration, Darfur? But this is real. What we love, how we fantasize, that’s who we are.’”<sup>1</sup> Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter are articulate and friendly over the phone. Like a large majority of Northampton, Massachusetts residents, they emphasize their opposition to the war in Iraq, harbor a fondness for NPR and identify themselves as “true Democrats”. If we were engaged in any other topic, we would probably agree on most points. As it happens, we are talking about porn. Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter are the primary instigators of one of the most heated debates in the history of our local Paradise. Together, they make up NoPorn Northampton.

The current porn controversy in Northampton began in June of this year, when Capital Video, a multi-million dollar Adult Entertainment corporation, announced plans

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<sup>1</sup> Phone Interview with Jendi Reiter and Adam Cohen, Sunday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006

to open a 6000+ square foot adult emporium on the corner of King and Summer streets, complete with private porn-viewing booths. Though news of the plans broke first on local resident Bill Dwight's WHMP Progressive Talk radio show, news quickly reached the larger Northampton public through a June 28th Daily Hampshire Gazette article. An immediate murmur of concern swept the city, especially in those neighborhoods closest to the proposed site. The Gazette's front page headline caught Adam Cohen's eye as he walked past a vending receptacle: the proposed site, a vacant building previously the city's Kia dealership, was only blocks from the home Cohen shares with Reiter. Within days, the pair had created a basic website opposing the proposed site-plan:

nopornnorthampton.org was born. While common public frets dealt with property value, pedestrian walkability of the area, and the survival of those establishments nearby whose nature were at odds with adult material (a church, a daycare center, a school for dance, and a mental health center, for example), the most impassioned reaction to the proposal was fear related to viewing booths. It was on these platforms that NoPorn created their petition of the site plan.<sup>2</sup>

It quickly became clear that anti-Capital activism could only be successful through the creation and implementation of legal regulations. In an effort to increase public knowledge of the incoming super-store, Cohen and Reiter mailed informational packets to all registered Northampton voters. NoPorn began to compile large quantities of anti-pornography material, transforming their simple website into an impressive online one-stop anti-porn archive, the first of its kind. They spoke out in favor of adult-business legislation, and encouraged readers to contact their city councilors. Before long, a set of

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Adam. <[www.nopornnorthampton.org](http://www.nopornnorthampton.org)> 2006

three separate but interconnected adult-use ordinances was under construction, sponsored by Councilors Marianne LeBarge, Marilyn Richards, and Mayor Mary Clare Higgins.<sup>3</sup>

The first ordinance, concerning signage and storefront visibility, required that no sexually explicit advertising, window displays, or any other adult merchandise be visible from pedestrian space. Though this ordinance went largely uncontested by Northampton residents and municipal officials, the burden of creating, monitoring, and enforcing the limitations of public “decency” fell heavily on Northampton Building Inspector Tony Patillo. As of Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the adult-use display standard was set as comparable to the standards of a Victoria Secret, the nation’s most popular lingerie chain.<sup>4</sup> Capital Video attorney Michael Pill proposed this comparative definition at a Planning Board meeting, nearly causing site-plan rejection. Not only was this an obscure and problematically subjective way in which to define limitations, but Victoria Secret had recently come under considerable public scrutiny, as their display mannequins became simultaneously more realistic, more scantily clad, and far more provocative in their poses.<sup>5</sup> But the planning board’s objection was mainly in relation to a photo, submitted by Pill, that he offered as a representative sample of Capital’s future window displays. The photo depicted several scantily clad mannequins engaged in light bondage activity.

The second ordinance directly addressed private pornographic viewing booths. The zoning of establishments containing such booths was amended into the existing zoning ordinance pertaining to live nude dancing. Both forms of adult entertainment may now only occur in the designated highway business district of the city, effectively

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Maureen Carney Thursday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Northampton City Council Meeting, Dec 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Dwyer, Timothy. “Skimpy Underwear, Ample Commentary at Tyson’s Corner,” Washington Post, 10/05/06. Page B01.

limiting adult-use locations to within the Big Y Plaza and the Hill and Dale Shops near the Northampton-Hatfield line.

The third ordinance was created to legislate allowable size and location of adult establishments of any variety. It was this last statute that garnered heavy criticism from Northampton residents, serving as the primary fodder for a microcosmic culture war which would resonate throughout the Pioneer Valley.<sup>6</sup>

According to the legislation, any adult-use establishment over 1,000 square feet in Northampton is subject to the following zoning regulations: a) they must be located at least 500 feet from all churches, residences, schools and other areas prone to high volumes of pedestrian traffic; b) they must be at least 500 feet from any other adult business; c) they must exist within the confines of the Highway Business Zone. Within this zone, an adult establishment can be virtually as large as is wanted, the only applicable size-cap being that which applies to other “Big Box” corporations: 90,000 square feet. While ordinances in other cities that regulate the location of all adult-themed stores, regardless of size, have withstood the court system as constitutional, Northampton was unable to draft such an ordinance without also subsequently ejecting several beloved local shops from their long-time locations throughout the city<sup>7</sup>. Modern Marvel Comics, Pleasant St. Video, LGBT bookstore Pride and Joy, and Oh, My! a female-friendly “sensuality boutique” were all in danger of being rezoned or closed. For this reason, the city created an ordinance which redefined adult-use businesses as establishments selling

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<sup>6</sup> Zoning Ordinance Amend 2.1, 5.2, and 10.13, Definitions General, Table of Use Regulations and Special Permits, Meeting minutes, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Oh, My! Sensuality Boutique, Pride and Joy, Modern Marvel Comics and Pleasant St. Video were all in danger of being zoned outside of their current location if the 1000 sq ft amendment was not made.

“adult books, magazines, videos, movies, software or any media or electronic recording, or adult paraphernalia,<sup>8</sup> provided the total display area of such material exceeds 1,000 square feet.<sup>9</sup>”

By the time I entered the NoPorn scene in September, NoPorn Northampton had been active for three months. “Oh, man” my friend Ellen’s eyes had widened in anticipation, “I can’t wait to hear what *you* have to say about this NoPorn thing”. Pots were bubbling in the kitchen, our respective partners’ quick banter exiled to the front porch for a before-dinner smoke break. As a locally registered voter, Ellen had spent the entire summer immersed in a controversy that remained invisible to me from my west coast home. A thick envelope had arrived unsolicited at her door, packed with explicit material and documentation of the secondary effects of pornography on individuals and communities. “It was infuriating.” Ellen added, after filling me in on the scandal. “They were preaching about saving *women*, but listing supposed ‘vile’ film titles sold by the store which all seemed to be *gay male* porn.”

Over the summer, Adam and Jendi had stumbled into political hot water several times. The material they sent out was undeniably adult material, and angry Northampton residents began to converse over whether the unmarked envelopes could be used to charge the couple with dissemination of unsolicited pornographic material through the

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<sup>8</sup> As defined by Massachusetts General Law 40A-9A or 272-31

<sup>9</sup> In legislation like this, square footage can be measured in multiple ways. In this case, NoPorn was lobbying for a method through which one piece of adult material on a shelf transformed the entire shelving system into adult space and which would include all adjacent aisle space. Eventually, the inclusion of aisle space was removed from the ordinance, effectively doubling the actual size of an establishment containing 1000 square feet of adult material. MGL 350-10.13.

mail.<sup>10</sup> Donations were encouraged at this time as well, though NoPorn had not yet filed non-profit status and were therefore not legally able to solicit for funding.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in collaboration with a large portion of the local community, they had fairly effortlessly emerged victorious from a battle against private viewing booths. The Northampton Planning Board had voted against the possibility of booths at this location and subsequently, Capital Video had withdrawn viewing booths from their proposal.

What was imperceptible to me by the time I became acquainted with NoPorn, was the level of ideological evolution that had taken place over the course of three months on the NoPorn website. I immediately equated the NoPorn struggle with anti-porn feminism, an estimation affected by the sheer volume of feminist anti-porn material published on the site. A good deal of the text displayed on the site was gleaned from the very heart of the feminist sex-wars of the 1970's and 1980's. Alliances, as well, were made clear on the site between NoPorn and Feminist Action Mobilization, a local activist group most visibly combating violence against women. It wasn't until I spoke to Adam and Jendi that I discovered that neither of them had prior experience with radical feminism or sex politics, and that they had only found their feminist allies in this struggle after several other (less successful) approaches to anti-porn activism.

Initially, NoPorn website visitors criticized Adam and Jendi as class elitists, when property value was their primary concern. The initial push to zone all adult stores into the

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, mailing unsolicited non-obscene adult material through the mail is not illegal activity unless the addressee has taken initiative to complete Postal Inspection Service Form 1500, "Application for Listing and/or Prohibitory Order." Not marking the envelopes with an "Explicit Material" warning, though extremely frowned upon by the Postal Inspection Service, is currently only enough to warrant a slap on the wrist. <http://www.usps.com/websites/depart/inspect/>

<sup>11</sup> Contrada, Fred. "Official: Pair Crossed Legal Line," The Republican. 10/05/06.

“highway business zone” became controversial as it became clear that this meant banishing the business NoPorn claimed *inherently* harmful into one of Northampton’s lowest income residential neighborhoods<sup>12</sup>. Later, the Cohen-Reiters employed twenty-year-old AIDS-scare rhetoric, material which, according to Mark Carmien of Northampton’s LGBT bookstore Pride and Joy<sup>13</sup>, was gleaned directly from evangelical attempts to justify homophobia through sexual stereotyping and fear of publicly transmitted infection.<sup>14</sup> This homophobic material depicted viewing booths and adult theaters as veritable Petri-dishes for HIV, not through unsafe sex acts themselves, but through bodily fluids remaining (semen in particular, as women were not mentioned). This material was combined with excerpts, harvested by Adam Cohen, from current gay male online chat sites, citing viewing booths as great locations for “hot NSA cock”,<sup>15</sup> as well as personalized comments from Adam and Jendi problematizing promiscuous sex, especially public sex between men.

Carmien, upset by the implications such representations could have on the gay community of Northampton, spoke out at a City Council meeting, declaring the material anti-gay and defamatory and requesting that it be removed from the NoPorn website. NoPornNorthampton was receptive and accommodating, altering language they believed could be perceived as homophobic, or that could negatively affect Carmien’s business. In a subsequent conversation with Mark Carmien, Cohen asked who NoPorn’s allies might

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Jendi Reiter and Adam Cohen Monday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>13</sup> Pride and Joy is Northampton’s only LGBT store and community resource center, and offers New England’s largest collection of LGBT movie rentals.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mark Carmien, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> NSA serves as a common abbreviation for “No Strings Attached”.

be in the community. Carmien mentioned the local feminist community as a potential resource, and the direction of NoPorn quickly shifted.<sup>16</sup>

Pornography is famous for dividing the masses, particularly those who fall to the left side of the median. The feminist “Sex Wars” of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s best exemplify this division, as women otherwise united against patriarchy and gender-bias formed very different factions of thinking regarding sexuality. Anti-porn crusaders like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon spoke out against the effects of pornography: frightening and sadistic male sexuality resulting in violence against women, child sexual abuse, infidelity, and further perpetuation of the forced subservience of the female sex. Most prominently, pornography was positioned as visual documentation of the dehumanization and rape of countless women, in the name of profit.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, liberal feminists insisted women’s liberation included a celebration of female sexuality, in all of its variabilities. To this day, there is no decidedly “progressive” stance on porn, as each school of thinking remains equally and actively controversial, among feminists and the larger public.

Pornography is perhaps the only space in which radical feminists and conservative members of the religious right have met on common ground. In Indianapolis in 1984, for example, Catherine MacKinnon joined forces with Moral Majority national secretary Rev. Greg Dixon, Stop-ERA activist Beulah Coughenour and an overwhelmingly Republican city council to pass “feminist” anti-pornography legislation. These unlikely collaborations made legislation of this nature possible; feminist rhetoric

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mark Carmien, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>17</sup> Dworkin, Andrea. “Against the Male Flood,” in Feminism and Pornography. Cornell, Drucilla, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000.

offered conservatives a new tool for battling immoral smut. Conservative allies allowed increased funding, political backing, and visibility for the anti-porn feminist cause.<sup>18</sup> Once legislation of this nature passed, however, unions like this one grew complicated. After the laws were on the books, enforcement was selective. For right-wing moralists holding positions of political power, the problem with pornography was (and is) an endorsement of immoral behavior combined with a hefty case of class-related NIMBYism;<sup>19</sup> the politics of these anti-porn supporters are anything but feminist or progressive. As Lisa Duggan so aptly put it, “[t]he problem has to do with the shaping of the law, the meaning of the law, and the understanding people give the law, as well as how the law is enforced and how it is interpreted by judges.<sup>20</sup>” It is those in power who control the ways in which laws are employed and enforced. Legal regulations regarding adult material leave most vulnerable “queer” spaces and individuals, women, and those without the political and social power that comes with economic advantage.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Dworkin and MacKinnon’s first successfully passed anti-pornography legislation in 1992, it was Glad Day Bookstore of Ontario that was targeted first, for selling *Bad Attitude*, a lesbian S/M magazine<sup>22</sup>. While liberal feminists criticized these alliances and

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<sup>18</sup> Duggan, Lisa and Nan Hunter. *Sex Wars*. New York: Routledge, 1995. pp. 70-71

<sup>19</sup> NIMBYism is the acronymic word for employment of a “Not In My Back Yard” attitude.

<sup>20</sup> Duggan, Lisa and Nan Hunter. *Sex Wars*. New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 71

<sup>21</sup> By my usage in this paper, “queer” serves as an umbrella term denoting non-heteronormativity, encompassing “LGBTQ” individuals but also those who identify as intersex, genderqueer, or asexual and those gender-normative heterosexuals who fall outside of heteronormative understandings of sexuality through involvement in polyamory, BDSM, or fetishism.

<sup>22</sup> The bookstore, which is currently the longest surviving lesbian bookstore in the world, is facing charges again in 2007, this time for carrying one gay adult video. The Ontario Film Review Board controls which commercial films can be shown or sold and can

attitudes as militant and “anti-sex”, anti-porn feminists pushed back, accusing those who were against them as against the survival of women. Any refusal to recognize the harmful effects of pornography was seen as collaboration with patriarchy itself and was labeled as “pro-porn”.

To quote Adam Cohen, “Illiberal people use liberal modes for illiberal purposes.” The reverse is equally true. Such tactics have been employed in the current battle in Northampton. As the debates grew more heated, veritable web wars emerged, and personal attacks on participants’ character, sexuality, and motive were rampant. Late in the debates, Adam Cohen became notorious for accusing his adversaries of “Astroturf,” the act of creating a false semblance of grassroots “pro-porn” opinion, while benefiting from a place on Capital Video’s hefty payroll. From the other side, there were numerous websites and blogs dedicated to the dissection of Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter’s anti-porn arguments as well as their methods of data collection. Over time, these criticisms deteriorated into personal attacks against the couple, including suggestions of a petition forbidding them from reproducing.<sup>23</sup> City Council meetings became local production numbers featuring an ensemble cast of alleged mafia ties, ex-sex workers, repentant porn addicts, religious leaders and anarchist posers opposing censorship.

The regulation of adult businesses, spurred on largely by the “successful” gentrification of New York City, has become commonplace in cities all over the country. In 1995, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani passed a citywide statute, outlawing adult-use businesses in most neighborhoods. While New York’s history includes countless attempts

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legally ban anything, regardless of whether it is judged legally obscene.

<<http://www.abebooks.com/home/GDBOOKSHOP/>>

<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.mopornnorthampton.com>>

to erase commercial sex and adult industries from the public sphere, this particular legislation was perhaps the most aggressive effort in the city's history to restrict property use in relation to sexual behavior through the utilization of municipal power. The result, of course, was the closing and relocation of countless adult establishments. While municipal legislation of this kind is largely successful because of the ease with which communities and governments can be moved into sex-induced panic, such zoning is also a product of economic influence: property value and a class-based hierarchy of personal comfort. Adult stores are almost always rezoned from economically "desirable" locations into low-income neighborhoods, where relation to property value, real-estate opportunity and the satisfaction of high-bracket taxpayers will be least affected.

In addition, such legislation often serves to deconstruct the delicate queer subcultures that organize in sexualized public spaces. While public sex is often demonized in mainstream culture, notoriously queer neighborhoods like New York's Times Square, San Francisco's Castro, and DC's Dupont Circle were made possible by sexual commerce. In *Sex in Public*, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner outline the ways in which adult stores can function as spaces within which alternative intimacies and peer-education can be organized and constructed:

Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. *Sex in Public*. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter 1998. P. 547-566.

The very absence of these normative relations leaves queer cultures and individuals particularly vulnerable within gentrification projects. In New York, 149 of 177 commercial sex establishments were closed, the remainder transplanted to the very few areas in the city where adult establishments were still allowable. Such “safe-space”<sup>25</sup> destruction most prominently affects working-class queers, queer youth, and people of color. Those upwardly mobile, predominantly white, gays and lesbians who serve as model consumers, homeowners and parents, are far less dependent upon public spaces within which to organize.

While visiting Mark Carmien in Northampton’s LGBT Bookstore, Pride and Joy, I asked if he worried about the safety of queer space in Northampton. His response surprised me. “There isn’t really as much of a need for designated spaces anymore.” He cited PTA meetings, municipal and environmental committees, and basically all of downtown Northampton as successfully converted LGBT-friendly spaces. While this may sound a queer Utopia, it neglects to address those individuals whose lives fit neatly into neither heteronormativity nor, what Lisa Duggan has coined, “Homonormativity,” an ideology which pushes for particular LGBT rights, primarily the rights of the middle and upper classes to participate in consumer culture and to privatization (creation of *individualized* queer space).

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<sup>25</sup> Safe-space is defined very differently by different people. For many, a neighborhood free of adult establishments undoubtedly feels immeasurably safer, but for many, queer men especially, adult theaters and viewing booths predominantly visited by men who have sex with other men, are experienced as much safer than say, a truckstop or a mostly heterosexual alley down by the piers. Samuel Delany, in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, testifies to having seen only one act of physical violence in over 20 years of frequenting Times Square adult theaters.

While material published on the pornography debate faction of the culture wars<sup>26</sup> is plentiful, there are very few ethnographic accounts of municipal debates like the one that occurred in Northampton, outside of New York's bright lights. What inspired me to create just such an account was an interest in the complexity of discourse which debates like this one incite. There is no better way to understand the complex nature of a city and its residents than to observe their actions and listen to their claims, and there are very few methods with which to record barely-tangible moments in history as effectively as through ethnographic research. This is not to say that ethnography is without qualitative flaws. I make no claims at objectivity; the following chapters are as surely affected by my academic approach and sociopolitical leanings as they are by the other participants'. Nevertheless, I have made every attempt to ensure fair and accurate representation of those members of the Northampton community kind enough to take the time to lend me their own subjectivities. My relationships with Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter have proven especially difficult to navigate. The couple has been nothing but gracious throughout this project and, frankly, the amassment of information on their website has been crucial to my process. Their approach to anti-pornography activism and their disregard for sexual and political diversity, however, have left me increasingly frustrated. I have struggled considerably with the ways in which I express these frustrations, concerned that I may come off as Anti-Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter.

My personal relationship to pornography is complicated. While I self-identify as feminist and queer, my most dominant identification is with sex-positivism. For many, the term "sex-positive" implies an idealistic denial of negative sexual systems. For me, I

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<sup>26</sup> Culture war, as understood from a basic American standpoint, refers to political conflict occurring between groups which hold very different idealized cultural values.

find the opposite to be true. The term emphasizes my belief in affording respect and legitimacy to any consensual and pleasurable sexual act or identity, regardless of mainstream cultural reaction. As someone who attempts to recognize and celebrate individual sexualities, I find it even more infuriating when boundaries of consent are crossed, when sexual violence occurs, or when interpersonal trust is broken. My reaction to pornography is first and foremost one of individuals' rights to material that "appeals to their prurient interest"<sup>27</sup>, but following close behind are my concerns with the elements of the mainstream pornography industry which I find troubling: unsatisfactory working conditions, lack of safer-sex practices, representations of sex without consent, encouragement of gender stereotypes and glaring sexism/heterosexism. To me, pornography-related activism includes fostering higher levels of diverse female-friendly and queer-friendly erotic material, and increased public sexual education outside of pop culture and porn.

This project is an interdisciplinary examination of one city's struggle to protect itself from the secondary effects associated with explicit depictions of sex. I am especially interested in the ways in which pornographic (and other sex-related) controversy is so often harnessed in the service of countless other power struggles. For some, the concern is feminist. For others, the objection is moral. For yet others, it is simply a matter of property value and economic viability. For those opposed to regulating adult-businesses, motives are equally diverse: first amendment concerns, protection of existing queer space, and opposition to sexual regulation. Whatever individual

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<sup>27</sup> In Federal and State Obscenity Law, an appeal to "prurient interest" combined with a lack of artistic value, and a "patently offensive" nature, is a key factor in determining whether material qualifies as obscene.

community members' motives, controversy over Northampton's potential porn store is one of the most exciting and emotional public debates the city has seen in decades. My hope is not to provide evidence of the "true nature" of pornography and its effects, but to understand the ways in which individuals in this community understand, experience, and utilize the politics of pornography, particularly in the service of other power struggles.

My DIV III consists of three chapters. The first section is a historical construction, a step backward in efforts to examine Northampton's specific porn-related history. In a town that prides itself on progressive values and educated masses, it is crucial to recognize what places and communities are made vulnerable by the regulation of sexuality. By working closely with Bet Power, a local LGBT archivist and activist, and engaging closely with primary and secondary historical materials, I have attempted to reconstruct a largely forgotten local history, relevant to Northampton's current pornographic controversy.

The second section is an ethnographic examination of the recent local debates themselves, focusing on the bureaucratic process, introducing key players in the debates, and illustrating the ambiguities and emotional responses which nip at the heels of any sexually-related legislation. Beginning in September, 2006, I attended all relevant public meetings and conducted interviews with those members of the Northampton community who participated most prominently in the public debates. Through participant observation and structured conversation, I have constructed a chapter that serves to illustrate the complexities of sexual discourse and municipal politics as they have played out in the city of Northampton.

The third and final chapter tackles the role of the Internet in the new pornography debates. While I conducted several in-person interviews in the formulation of this chapter, a large portion of the material analyzed is gleaned directly from the websites created to chronicle these particular municipal happenings: [nopornnorthampton.org](http://nopornnorthampton.org), [mopornnorthampton.com](http://mopornnorthampton.com) and several local blogs. How does today's online access to pornography change the nature, or relevance, of adult stores? How are small-town disputes altered by the prevalence of split-second informational access and the anonymity made possible by the Internet age? Throughout this project, I hope to address questions that make this debate, and all like it, so interesting to me. What is an adult-use establishment? What is inside? Can it be deemed queer? Is this a matter of free speech vs. censorship? Who determines whether depictions of sex acts are appropriate, acceptable, or safe? How are alliances formed and broken? And what is it about sex that drives us to such frenzy and fear?

## **Chapter 1:**

### **A Short History of Anti-Porn Action in Paradise**

The Sexual Minority Archive lives where you least expect it. Move past industrial traffic, under overhangs, round suburban corners and there it is. A nondescript old farmhouse on the river, fronted by a three-season porch and tucked beside a less fortunate sibling home. The other house on Bet Power's rented property has long been condemned and boarded, a "No Trespassing" sign at its door. When I arrive today, Bet is winter-proofing the yard, pacing from the far reaches of the shriveling lawn to the basement hatch, tucking landscaping tools and decorative touches out of the way of the bluster. Marilyn (Monroe), by far the less feminine of Bet's two cats, is attempting to tuck herself away as well, pushing against the front door beside me as Bet sends me inside to warm up. Inside the archive, which is also Bet's home, I've become accustomed to offers of tea and cider, answers to all my questions, and DIV III saving graces; this space, and Bet, have pleasantly complicated the ways in which I understand Northampton, notions of alliance and space, and the current NoPorn Northampton debates.

Type "Bet Power" into a Google search, and you discover the true range of his duties as one designated keeper of the valley's LGBT flame: besides directing and curating an extensive archive of local and national material documenting the queer experience, Bet has been actively involved with the U-Mass Stonewall Center, is the founder of the East Coast Female-To-Male Group (ECFTMG), is the founder of Shelix, Northampton's first lesbian and bisexual S/M support group, a co-founder of Lesbians and Gays Against Censorship and Self-Destruction, and a Pride organizer from 1982-2006. The list goes on and on. World Wide Web searches reveal a younger Bet, stern-

faced and leather-clad. Since we've met, he usually answers the door in button-downs and creased slacks, his wit the most pointed thing about him. I get the impression that Bet is forcing himself to take on less as the years propel him into midlife, focusing more time and energy on the immense efforts required in the archival process. The sheer volume of material in the archive feels impressive at first, overwhelming next, and finally impossible, as I begin to understand the complexities inherent in organizing such miscellaneous bulk. It is in this location of concentrated knowledge that I finally find my direction, though it often slips back away from me to finger its way through curious files.

I first visited the archives with a large group of fellow students, on an outing tied to a course entitled "Queer Cultures". Somehow, despite being introduced to the archives as a prime informational resource, it took me a good deal of time to find my way back. Saturated with the current NoPorn bureaucracy and action, it wasn't until my first interview with Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter, founders of NoPorn, that I began to dig my toes into Northampton's anti-porn history. I had been interested, since the onset of my project, in the lack of visible opposition to the Cohen-Reiter campaign. A good deal of the information supplied on their site made me uncomfortable, as a Northampton resident and as a scholar of sex. A large percentage of the statistical and scientific "evidence" on the site was harvested from the 1980s and, as I discuss throughout, included rhetoric that by today's standards seemed outright homophobic, and in some cases, factually wrong.<sup>28</sup>

I'd certainly located online evidence of opposition: Talk Back Northampton--an anti-censorship site headed by local lawyer Peter Brooks-- MoPorn Northampton--a

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<sup>28</sup> Risk of environmental transmission of HIV without active exchange of bodily fluids, is extremely rare. In fact, Center of Disease Control studies have estimated the theoretical risk of transmission through bodily fluids left in public spaces at virtually zero. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/transmission.htm>

mostly satirical site covering the local controversy-- and several local bloggers all voiced their concern through the Web. I had witnessed many prominent community members speak out against proposed legislation at city council meetings. But the most notorious and widely reported pro-sex stance in this debate so far had been the handful of teenage boys who counter-picketed alongside NoPorn and Feminist Action Mobilization, holding homemade signs made from dissected cardboard boxes reading “Honk if You’re Horney” and “Naked Women is Art!” These boys were certainly (and unfortunately) the only pro-sex leaning stance reported on by the Boston Globe.<sup>29</sup> Throughout my college experience, I have been persistently occupied with the ways in which the sexual is so often deemed apolitical or anti-political by academics, and is too often equated with an idealistic blind-eye approach or utilization of “the wrong head.”<sup>30</sup> After all, as a scholar of sex, my intellectual legitimacy is perpetually questioned. The question was bright behind my eyes: where is my generation in this conversation? I, for one, know that moral/political positions on pornography will never exist in dichotomized opposition to one another; this valley must be swarming with intellectual sex-radicals, queer activists and 1<sup>st</sup> amendment pros whose relation to pornography is as complex as my own.

When I questioned friends, many or most of whom are activists of past or present, I usually received one of four answers. For some, Capital Video was not a space thought to be inclusive of or catering to them as individuals. Others were concerned with allying with a soulless big-box corporation, dedicated exclusively to turning profit, not with

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<sup>29</sup> Russell, Jenna. Boston Globe. “Adult Video Store Plan Divides Northampton,” 9/25/06.

<sup>30</sup> This is a common slang expression used to describe action or thought motivated by prurient (or genital) interest rather than logical thinking, the other “head,” of course, being the head of the penis.

contributing to sex-positive culture in our valley. A few people, myself included at times, were frustrated with the ways in which this dichotomized anti-porn vs. anti-prudery struggle seems to happen over and over, generation after generation, bearing no concrete result from efforts in either direction and not advancing the creation of middle-ground. The response which I want to focus upon here, however, and which I've received in some way or another from almost everyone I've engaged, is that the anti-censorship fight in Northampton is not a worthwhile fight because there is no danger posed. As the argument goes, the risk of a slippery censorship slope *here* is a joke. We live in a remarkably progressive, queer friendly, and above all, highly educated hamlet—a couple of sex-phobic “wackos,”<sup>31</sup> be they left or right oriented, pose no threat to this “paradise” we've created. Interestingly, this is the same argument Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter use against questions of censorship posed on their website, criticism coming faster and harder as the pair publish denouncements of all sex work, S/M, non-monogamy, and anything promoting “promiscuous” sex.

This theory of educated invincibility led me to dig into Northampton's history. The most renowned and most accessible case of pornographic scandal in the area was that of Smith College Professor Newton Arvin. Hailed as one of the brightest and well-liked Smith professors of the time period, Arvin was investigated and tried in the early 1960's on obscenity trafficking charges. The “pornography” confiscated in a raid of his home was extremely tame by modern standards, mostly consisting of male beefcake photos and private journal entries and letters recounting homosexual sex acts. After losing tenure,

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<sup>31</sup> By far, the most frequent language used to describe Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter in informal conversation with participants and community members.

Arvin and several other professors were dragged through what can only be described as a homosexual witch-hunt, lasting several years and utterly destroying their careers.

A full generation later, pornographic controversy in Northampton was again in the headlines. I was perched bleary-eyed before a Forbes library microfilm machine when I stumbled upon a January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1989 Amherst police blotter mention of a woman, Sandra Goodman, arrested for destruction of pornographic materials at local periodical shop Amherst Newsroom. Scanning subsequent Gazette stories for further mention of the case, I found only one follow-up article before giving up on microfilm. This one, covering a 25-woman picket of Amherst Newsroom, cited 70 varieties of alleged “pornographic” material sold inside. According to the article, there was a large contingent of women present at the protest who supported Sandra Goodman’s approach to activism. Goodman had become the poster-woman for anti-porn direct action in the Valley, inspiring a variety of similar acts in the year to come.

Back at the Sexual Minority Archives, 1989’s file is fat. It is 12:00 pm on a Sunday afternoon and I am buried up to my waist in the year I was 5. Through the medium of ephemera--tattered flyers, personal letters, published articles--it reads like a Hollywood manuscript: death threats, violent protest, burning crosses on our heroines’ lawn. Jil Krolik and Kiriyo Spooner, owners of Northampton’s infamous lesbian bookstore ,Womonfyre Books, survived Christian fundamentalist homophobic attacks at the hands of local resident, Robert Kremensky, for close to three years, often sleeping in the commercial space to ensure its existence come morning. An arrest was finally made in 1983 and it was only once Kremensky was convicted and sentenced for these hate crimes that Krolik and Spooner realized they had additional opposition to contend with.

After eleven years of creating and maintaining inclusive queer space in Northampton at a time when very little existed, their business was boycotted, vandalized, and eventually replaced by other, less controversial, lesbian feminists.<sup>32</sup>

Valley women of my generation, imported from all corners, have learned, (and claimed) Northampton as a lesbian Paradise. Like P-Town, San Francisco, Key West, and Amsterdam, Northampton has a notably queer reputation. Smith College has long been hailed as a young feminist Mecca in national press, and the women keep coming. It is hard to imagine the Northampton the archives describe: a strong, angry female collective butting heads against an equally angry and powerfully homophobic contingent of “good ol’ boys.” The mid-80’s, however, brought a wave of homophobic action against visible members of the LGBT community in the valley. Womonfyre, along with the Sexual Minorities Archives,<sup>33</sup> were faced with the brunt of the harassment. Even flyering the greater public became difficult; in a time before e-mail and cell-phone caller ID, home phone numbers and physical addresses were an essential bit of organizing contact information. By the height of the 80’s homophobic harassment in the Valley, however, any publication of personal information in connection with queer organizing brought anonymous verbal violence. For these reasons, designated queer publics became exponentially more important.

The seventies had marked the height of lesbian feminist separatism in the valley. Women-owned businesses were not merely thriving; a virtual feminist sub-city had emerged. Ceres Inc, a female owned and operated corporation taking up most of Masonic

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Bet Power, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>33</sup> At that time, the Sexual Minorities Archive was still called the New Alexandria Lesbian Library, a transplanted archive brought with Bet when he came to the valley from Chicago in 1979.

St, served as a larger organized container for a myriad of female-friendly businesses. The Common Womon Club, Greasy Gorgon Garage-a lesbian mechanic duo who fixed (women's) cars and taught do-it-yourself classes-, The Valley Women's Voice newspaper, performance spaces, and even an all women's restaurant co-oped side by side. As Northampton's lesbian separatism dwindled in ideological popularity over the years<sup>34</sup>, however, many community leaders left the area. By the time Bet Power arrived in 1979, The Valley Women's Voice and Womonfyre were all that were left. In terms of physical, tangible, lesbian-identified space, Womonfyre and the archives were it.<sup>35</sup>

According to Bet, Womonfyre stood out from its Ceres Inc. sisterhood, most obviously through their insistence on inclusion (people of all genders and sexual orientations were named as welcome) and their consistent acknowledgment of race, class, and sexual diversity within the lesbian and bisexual population. The couple had an openly celebratory approach to diversity in sexuality, at a time when most local feminist discussions of sex revolved around sexual violence, rape, and heterosexual resistance. The "sex-positive" movement had begun to develop nationwide, including campaigns for sex-workers rights, pro-eroticism, and perhaps most controversial among the lesbian feminist community, Sadomasochism, bondage and fetishism. Womonfyre carried a wide array of explicit material in their store: publications by Pat Califia, Annie Sprinkle and Artemis OakGrove were just a few examples of depictions of lesbian sex that could be found on the shelves. In fact, according to a New Alexandria Lesbian Library (the

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<sup>34</sup> A large percentage of feminist-identified individuals consider lesbian separatism counter to many of the original goals of feminism, which sought to establish equality across genders, not the promotion of the oppression/elimination of the male-bodied.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Bet Power on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and Maureen Carney on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

previous name of the Sexual Minority Archives) press release, “the broad range of literature Womonfyre stocked made it one of the largest, most-complete Lesbian book stores in the country.”<sup>36</sup>

On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian came into existence in 1984, marking the first widely distributed lesbian-made, lesbian-consumed porn magazine in history. Founded largely in response to what creators Debi Sundahl and Nan Kinney perceived as a profoundly and persistently anti-sex attitude in feminism at the time, even the title served as a jab to the lesbian feminist community, combining a play on lesbian feminist newspaper title “Off Our Backs”, and the subtitle snagged from hetero-porn empire Playboy.<sup>37</sup> Two additional lesbian erotic magazines followed: Outrageous Women and Bad Attitude. While Jil and Kiriyo may have been passionate about sexual expression, they were even more invested in the economic support of lesbian-owned and operated businesses.<sup>38</sup> They began stocking the publication soon after its creation, much to the delight of a large portion of the local lesbian community. Bet remembers Womonfyre as the only place to buy the magazines between NYC and Boston. Pre-internet, there was no other way to get lesbian-catered sexual material, outside of a paper subscription or the big city.

Bet also remembers the casual gossip that began to materialize, directed personally against Krolik and Spooner:

...it really did come down to resentment about their politics. And their politics were not only pro-sex and pro porn--not necessarily mainstream porn, but pro-

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<sup>36</sup> New Alexandria Lesbian Library Press Release, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1989

<sup>37</sup> <<http://www.onourbacksmag.com>> Heather Findlay, Editor-in-Chief, H.A.F. Publishing,

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Bet Power, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

lesbian-porn-- they were also antiwar, anti-racism, they were also leftist, they were socialist. So yeah. They were...they were lefties.

Bet contrasts this leftist stance with the more prevalent “New England Puritanism” of the time and the homogeneous understandings of lesbian identity by many white, upper-class lesbians in the valley:

I just find that even among lesbian feminists in that time and that era there was a streak of conservatism, and I try to analyze it and I think some of it had to do with class background too of some of these women who were affluent and white and didn't really understand the intersections of race and class as well as sexual orientation. And the women who ran Womonfyre Books did.

Womonfyre strove for consistent representation of working class women and women of color in the store, and resisted putting pressure on “the purchase,” encouraging women who couldn't afford to buy to come and browse and attend events.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1980's, when feminist women divided nationally over issues of sexuality, it became difficult to work actively against sexual violence and the lingering misogynistic qualities inherent in heteronormative coupling, the work force, and family life while maintaining a sex-positive attitude. Krolik and Spooner refused to be categorized in this manner. According to Bet, the couple drew strong lines between heterosexuality and heterosexism and between the importance of anti-violence activism and the right to consensual S/M. They encouraged sexual exploration, but remained seriously involved in the complicated and individualized ways in which sex can be experienced.

One piece of handwritten ephemera in the archives, an unfinished, handwritten letter on notebook paper from Jil Krolik to Womonfyre's clientele, requests respect for diverse needs and desires within the “resource notebooks” housed in the store. The books

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Bet Power, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

held a myriad of organizing information ranging from lesbian-friendly vacation suggestions to sexual violence support group meeting details to educational workshops.<sup>9</sup> Krolik's emotional strain becomes clear in the letter as the language deteriorates from organized concern to heated pleas for recognition. She mentions acceptance of sexual diversity as a key obstacle in the struggle for solidarity within the lesbian community. "I do not think it is proper for individuals to write off-color comments nor pull out any notices because they do not want them in the notebooks. I cannot believe that women can be so cruel to each other."<sup>40</sup> It becomes clear that Krolik is defending herself as well, as she requests that women cease leaving "notes with my name and a ghost-buster symbol," (in other words, "anti-Jil Krolik" propaganda) in the store. Krolik's handwriting deteriorates as she admits how tired she is; after ten years of lesbian organizing, she could not stand being discredited by the community she'd fought for. I don't know if she ever finished the letter, or began a new draft. This copy stops suddenly, mid-sentence, as if interrupted.

Although exact dates are almost impossible to come by, active feminist objection to Womonfyre's content emerged some time after sexually explicit material appeared in the store, probably around 1985 or 1986. The political ante against violence against women was upped when several area lesbians were raped. A third sexual assault in 1988, this time directed against a Smith College student, sent Valley women into action.

Following the recent publications of texts like Pornography: Men Possessing Women,

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<sup>40</sup> Handwritten Ephemera from Sexual Minority Archives. Written by Jil Krolik, undated.

and the heartbreaking (if debated) testimony of ex porn-star Linda Lovelace,<sup>41</sup> anti-violence activism became inextricably connected to anti-pornography activism, the two linked in a cause-effect partnership.<sup>42</sup>

A nondescript two-page flyer slides out of the stack. “There is something wrong with this picture,” it reads. The newsletter, distributed following the criminal charges pressed against Sandra Goodman, mentions Goodman’s illegal action (the pouring of a “glue-like substance” on a rack of pornographic magazines) but focuses more directly on the larger misogynistic picture. “Monday, January 1989 was a day like any other. Across the country, countless women were sexually harassed, beaten, and raped by men... On that day [the men] went free.” But Sandra Goodman was charged with “Willful and Malicious destruction of Private Property”, a “crime against the people”.<sup>43</sup> Other flyers accompany this one, a series with the headline “Protest Pornography!” These flyers cite statistics of domestic and sexual violence and draw lines between the consumption of pornography and these incidences of misogyny. There are quotes from Ted Bundy, confirming pornography as the seed behind his sickening violent urges, and encouragement of “creative, dramatic acts” against local smut-peddlers.<sup>44</sup> Sandra Goodman, with much of the Valley’s lesbian feminist support behind her, had taken such

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<sup>41</sup> Linda Lovelace, born Linda Boreman, starred most notably in *Deep Throat* before publicly denouncing pornography in 1980 through the publication of *Ordeal*, an account of her repeated coercion and rape in the pornography industry. She went on to pose for *Leg Show* magazine in 2001, stating “there’s nothing wrong with looking sexy as long as it’s in good taste.”

<sup>42</sup> MacKinnon, Catharine A. and Andrea Dworkin. *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Flyer, The Ad-Hoc Anti-Porn Group. April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

<sup>44</sup> Flyer, Coalition for Non-Oppressive Sexuality, April, 1989.

direct action against those perceived as women's oppressors: men who produce, sell, and consume pornography.

On Saturday August 26, 1989 at 3:00 p.m. over one hundred women and their allies stormed the downtown intersection of King and Main streets. Within 15 minutes, the group had blocked traffic in all directions with yellow "caution" tape and bodies. The date marked the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the amendment to the constitution guaranteeing women the right to vote. The women taking part in this protest were voting against the traffic of women, and the violence brought by men on innocent strangers, girlfriends, wives, and daughters. Pornography was at the top of the women's agenda; they were also there to show their support for Sandra Goodman.<sup>45</sup>

What had started as a peaceful rally in Pulaski Park quickly became hostile, as police arrived to break up the protestors. Requests to disperse went unheeded for close to half an hour before police made their first arrests. Two women, unidentified in the article, were swept away to the city police station without incident. However, the police cruiser carrying a third arrested protestor was surrounded by women on foot, some clambering onto the hood to prevent the officers from proceeding. Over the next two hours, city police were able to clear King and Pleasant streets, as well as one lane of eastbound traffic on Main. West-flowing traffic, however, as well as the courthouse sidewalk and the street's center median, remained swarming with chanting feminists. By 5:15 pm, Northampton Police captain Michael Wall called in Massachusetts state troopers as well as several off-duty officers in full riot gear. Subsequently, six additional arrests were

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<sup>45</sup> Vito, Michael and Laurie Loisel. "Nine Women Arrested in Protest" Daily Hampshire Gazette, 8/28/1989.

made, some of which, according to defendants, occurred under an “absolutely uncalled for display of force”. Upon booking, all women arrested gave Sandra Goodman’s name and address, refusing to offer their own identities until it became clear that they would have to do so in order to make bail.<sup>46</sup>

*The Valley Women’s Vengeance*, a handmade periodical that we would today call a ‘zine, published several issues in the late ‘80s. Extremely radical in nature, *Vengeance* advocated indiscriminant castration of men, supported resistance against all womon-oppressors (and their collaborators) at all costs, and above all, encouraged direct action. The women of *Vengeance* remained strictly anonymous throughout their campaign, although several long-time Northampton residents hinted to me in conversation that the women arrested for the destruction of pornographic material at Amherst Newsroom and the subsequent public protest were members, if not leaders, of this extremely private contingent. *The Valley Women’s Vengeance* focused on the violence committed against women, listing pornography as a direct influence. The ‘zine included direct action maps of the city of Northampton, identifying those businesses which participated in the systematic violence against women. This list prominently featured Womonfyre Books as allying with misogyny. Ideas for action were also listed, including “how-to” sections on getting away with destruction of offensive property.<sup>47</sup>

Digging deeper into my miracle folder, I find what Bet explains is an actual example of a defaced “On Our Back” destroyed at Womonfyre. Cover ripped off and many pages missing, the magazine conjures for me images of screaming protesters

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<sup>46</sup> Daily Hampshire Gazette, Volume 203, Number 302. Northampton, MA, August 28, 1989.

<sup>47</sup> New Alexandria Lesbian Library, Press Release. April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

moving among the giant purple crystals and woman-oriented art that filled Womonfyre. Unfortunately, my imagined viciousness seems a fairly accurate account. On several occasions, groups of women stormed the shop, destroying sexually explicit material, and other books as well, screaming all the while: “You sell pornography!” Stickers plastered the front windows, reading, “This insults women.” Other, less visible action took form in outrageous levels of indiscriminant shoplifting. Not much of the magazine remains intact. There is an information article on fisting by Susie Bright, a few light S/M and bondage snapshots (more “Bettie Page” than hardcore), some high-femme “garters and heels” type layouts, but much of the magazine is dedicated to simple and sexy depictions of realistic-looking women loving women, articles on gay icons, ads for queer dating services and other organizing resources.

At some point, this community of feminists in the Valley who had become disenchanted with Womonfyre’s permissive (and promiscuous) nature, collectively rallied for a new bookstore. Opening in 1988, Lunaria was this community’s answer: another lesbian feminist business, created as a “safe space” for those made uncomfortable by the gender and ideological inclusivity of Womonfyre and abiding by a promise never to sell the smut offered by their rival shop, including erotica, graphic comic books, sex toys and, most vehemently, On Our Backs and other pornography. According to Bet, Lunaria’s intent was far from subtle. Receiving unprecedented advertising and event coverage in Northampton’s Lesbian Calendar, a widely mailed newsletter covering all woman-friendly happenings in the valley, Lunaria was soon the talked-about lesbian space in Northampton, leaving Womonfyre’s sales 20, then 30, and then 40-percent below average. It was around this time that Krolik threw in the towel, handing ownership

over entirely to Kiriyo Spooner. The couple had long since parted ways romantically, and Krolik no longer felt the Northampton community had a place for her in it. Spooner attempted a few additional months, carrying new material, hosting more frequent events, but still arrived many mornings to find Lunaria flyers posted over the front windows of her shop. Bet remembers the last day he visited the store. “We’re closing.” Kiriyo had told him. “Take whatever you want for the archives.”<sup>48</sup>

Bet looks about wistfully, explaining that a good deal of the material in the archives today are abandoned materials from the Womonfyre shelves:

They had survived the homophobic harassment, the death threats, they had survived their business being sucked out into this other store, but really I think the straw that broke their back was when women came in, some women came in and did physical damage to their stock. Because they sold *On Our Backs*...I think it broke their hearts.

Womonfyre’s story is one of Northampton’s (and the nation’s) most poignant examples of what Bet Power terms “horizontal oppression” within the queer community. Jil Krolik and Kiriyo Spooner were driven out of business, not by homophobic community members or by evangelical Christians; the couple was edged out of business by members of the very same community they sought to serve. Bet insists that never in his organizing or archiving has he heard of another lesbian bookstore run-out or shut down by other lesbians. Northampton’s feminist community not only participated in the larger ideological and political conflict we call the sex-wars, but, in many instances, led the way along with New York City and San Francisco, in creating templates for what it meant to exist successfully on one side of the rift or the other. Being on the “pro-sex” team meant instantaneous removal from the category “political lesbian,” an identity

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Bet Power, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

reserved for those more “serious” about fighting patriarchy. According to many, being a good political lesbian required the adoption of a hefty laundry list of “anti” causes, with anti-pornography sentiment always placed somewhere close to the top. Jil and Kiriyo, from the space of *Womonfyre*, spoke openly of the problematic nature of this either/or political dichotomy and spoke publicly regarding both their anti-rape, anti-violence, and anti-war sentiments, and also their politically legitimate pro-sex, pro- diversity stance, causing considerable discomfort among many radical lesbian feminists. This is the most emotional I’ve seen Bet throughout the course of our conversations. We are sitting in the “living room” of the archive, an archaic microphone held between us:

I mean if you’re *Take Back the Night* and you’re anti-sexual assault, part of me can understand, though I don’t agree with, targeting *Playboy* and *Hustler*. But I cannot for the life of me justify how someone with that mindset could then make a huge leap and say we’re gonna destroy lesbian produced property, a magazine, that is sold in a lesbian bookstore!<sup>49</sup>

I wonder, were there no boundaries explored between sexual explicitness and the exploitation of women? *Womonfyre* was the first target of anti-porn direct action in Northampton, long before the Amherst Newsroom incident or the downtown protests. Why were such levels of woman-centered concern and anger turned inward upon fellow lesbian feminists? Was perceived collaboration with “the enemy” deemed all the more insidious when it existed within the lesbian community? Ironically, anti-porn alliances were sometimes made in the 1980s between radical lesbian feminists and openly anti-gay (and some anti-feminist) individuals and groups.<sup>50</sup> Right wing efforts to eradicate sexual expression and homogenize sexual identity and experience were at their most successful

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Bet Power, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Duggan, Lisa and Nan Hunter. *Sex Wars*. London: Routledge, 1995.

in the 1980's, in part, because of their newly formed alliances with members of the feminist community. Feminist anti-porn activists allowed these collaborations, as they strengthened (and often funded) the struggle to eradicate misogynistic pornography. The problems with such alliances emerged after anti-obscenity legislation was passed, after the public had been convinced of the inherent harms associated with pornography. It was then that feminists and their far-right collaborators were forced to terms with their very different understandings of, and goals for, the eradication of pornography.<sup>51</sup>

Bet and I have hit a silence in our current conversation. I am sorting through my notes on the couch, but peek up to glimpse Bet, sitting in the chair opposite me, looking thoughtfully around the room. We've been voicing our frustrations with anti-porn feminism for well over an hour, and our 10:30 pm time limit is close at hand. Bet ends our quiet:

Given what we just discussed, I can now make a connection between why there is no objection to shutting out a porn store in this particular community...I think one could argue that lesbians in this particular community have always been anti-porn primarily, and those of us like myself and the archives here and Womonfyre, were exceptions to the rule. We didn't know it then, but looking back on it I think we were the rebels...

In a town like Northampton, it is not just partner choice that marks you as queer. Even within the notorious, progressive, lesbian community, sexual difference can set you apart:

It's so unbelievable that that still happens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that people actually think that, think of sex as dirty. It's... it makes me—it's one of the things that actually makes me think that I'm living in the wrong area, ya know?

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<sup>51</sup> Duggan, Lisa and Nan Hunter. Sex Wars. London: Routledge, 1995. Pp.70-71

I hadn't thought about the possibility of Bet leaving the valley, and the recognition alarms me. He smiles at my reaction, as if to say, "Don't worry. I'm in no hurry." I hope, for Northampton's sake, that he stays.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The Appropriate Means to an Anti-Porn End: Attending to Sexual**

#### **Bureaucracy in the City of Northampton**

##### **In Council Chambers: Faces Emerge**

Council Chambers are an easy space to feel “obvious.” I hurried into my first City Council meeting, five minutes late and terrified that I’d missed something crucial. Like a classroom interruption, half of those present turned to look at the new face, a face I assumed stood sorely out among a crowd of “regulars.” According to Maureen Carney, current city councilor, the Capital Video issue has been by far the most heated debate to come through city council in her time.<sup>52</sup> It has also proven to draw one of the most diverse crowds interested in putting forth their say during “public comment”. Despite stringent enforcement of a set structure each week, the Council Chambers environment is perpetually shifting as different topics for discussion draw very different populations.

This first visit surprised me considerably as I wedged myself between a nondescript older couple and a group of college-aged men and women sporting heavy boots, impressive facial hardware and a veritable rainbow of hair-dye. It was September 21<sup>st</sup>, and I was yet to discover how quick the public meeting attendee turnover rate is. And how long the meetings are. It takes dedication to sit in a too warm room with strobing fluorescent lights and the close company of strangers for hours on end, listening to the carefully assessed measurements and parking concerns and lighting requirements of hopeful future businesses. In most cases, it was at least 10 p.m. by the time the adult-

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Maureen Carney, 02/09/2007

zoning proposal came up. I assume that it was for these reasons that concerned members of organizations like Feminist Action Mobilization and Safe Passage eventually seemed to drop out of attendance; neighbors and concerned parents stopped in and out. Over the course of the next two months, I would attend a total of six public meetings in this space. As attendance ebbed and flowed, it became clear who the primary characters in this debate were.

Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter always held prime real estate in the right side of the first row. In the lull that occurred between cases, Cohen often browsed the crowd, passing out hard copy of the most recent NoPorn Northampton website contents. When I first introduced myself to him, he shook my hand emphatically and thanked me heartily for coming, an eager social host in business-casual attire. Jendi, with her tight dark curls and thick glasses, was always dressed professionally from the waist up, but also sometimes appeared in pajama pants and clogs, out of view of the video cameras recording the meetings. There was Bonnie Rose, a petite and charismatic ex porn-industry insider against the legislation of sexuality. There was eccentric Dianna Davies, a Smith graduate in her 70s, in favor of sexual freedom but staunchly opposed to the violence of today's mainstream smut. There was Peter Brooks, an excitable entertainment lawyer with a passion for first-amendment rights, and his several assistants, outspoken young anarchists who eventually ceased "assisting" to speak their own words. Later in the debates, there was blogger Adam Shelffo, who was to become the token "young father figure" of council chambers. Initially entirely opposed to the prospect of a pornography store in Northampton, he surprised everyone at a City Council meeting in

which he stated that after further research, he was no longer convinced of the inherent dangers of adult enterprises.

Over the course of the next three months, I would come to recognize all of these locals frequenting the podium. At Council meetings, public comment always proceeds in one long swoop at the beginning of each meeting. Every citizen has the right to speak their mind about anything they wish, as long as they abide by their allotted timeslot. This can make for an interesting mishmash of 3-minute topic shifts--ranging from local teenage drug-related death to plans for a Northampton Hilton--the amalgamation of which can take anywhere from twenty minutes to three hours. I was excited on my first visit by the prospect of listening to the voices of my city, and was disappointed to observe the Councilors, and especially Mayor Mary Clare Higgins peering blankly out, appearing exhausted, even genuinely depressed. At every public meeting I attended, a range of community members stood to make statements about the adult-use ordinances, some in favor, some against. These applicable moments came sandwiched between dozens of non-porn related comments. After the first hour, I began to understand the blank municipal stares.

That night, a petite young woman, dressed in a business casual suit, introduced herself to the Council as Yoshi Bird. Before moving to Northampton, Ms. Bird served as Assistant District Attorney in New York City, prior to which she served the San Francisco D.A. on the Crimes Against Prostitutes Program. Through street outreach, mentoring, and legal counseling she has amassed over five years of work with sex-workers. She called for a more thoughtful, less polarized perspective.

What has resonated through all of these stories has been rape, violation, the exploitation of poverty, youth, immigration status and prior sexual trauma. What

is most important to me in the world, and in Northampton, are the human rights of those who are reduced to speech by the rhetoric of those who fly the free-speech flag in bad faith. I believe these ordinances carve out protection for free sexual expression that is neither harmful nor exploitative, while working to keep children and other vulnerable populations out of the reach of sex abuse industries.”<sup>53</sup>

Northampton resident Karen Berkovici stood to declare the right to oppose hate speech:

We pride ourselves on being a community of tolerance...But let's have tolerance for the more than fifty percent of our population who are female, because there is no doubt that pornography...impacts their human and civil rights.<sup>54</sup>

Many parents faced the council to defend the ordinances and the protection of their children. Homeowners stood to speak of their property value concerns.

Not all local residents who spoke out against Capital Video at Council meetings were willing to be aligned with NoPorn Northampton, or with the ordinances in question. At this September 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, Shoshanna M. spoke to show her support for the ordinances, but also her disapproval of NoPorn's attempts to police the behavior and opinions of other adults. “It is all too easy to talk about *other* peoples' consumption of porn...” Phil Brocklesby stated that he believed that by enforcing the proposed zoning ordinance and pushing large porn stores to the edges of town, the city would be creating a self fulfilling prophecy, resulting in less pedestrian accessibility (read: more auto traffic) and more difficulty self-policing and ensuring that secondary effects do not occur. In other words, violent crime is much less likely to occur in densely populated areas like King St. Though having a potential pornographic eyesore in the middle of town may not be ideal, it adds many more watchful eyes to the equation. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, Corrina

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<sup>53</sup> Bird, Yoshi. Northampton City Council Meeting, Public Comment segment, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006

<sup>54</sup> Berkovici, Karen. City Council Meeting, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

Yazbek, a young woman in hoop earrings and a cowl-neck sweater, stood to address pornography, poverty, and the family. Her eloquent monologue addressed those aspects of NoPorn Northampton which she did not feel were compatible with the site's declared "feminist" stance. She referred to an article published on the site "unfortunately titled 'Dan Quayle was Right,'" drawing a linear connection from porn to adultery to inevitable divorce, and finally to single motherhood and poverty:

The 'feminist' preachings of NoPorn are eerily conservative and out of step with Northampton...Please do not pass these ordinances based on some people's inability to overcome their discomfort with sexual material that doesn't conform to heterosexual monogamy. If we really want to talk about economic justice for women, I would be happy to suggest laws and education that would get us there.<sup>55</sup>

During the same meeting, a man standing to voice his disapproval of the ordinances made a point to address Capital Video attorney Michael Pill directly. "Do not confuse my disapproval of these ordinances with support for your cause. I am not happy that this store is coming, and I will be watching very closely. Nevertheless, I defend your rights."<sup>56</sup> This sentiment was echoed time and again at public meetings. Very few Northampton residents were excited by the prospect of a corporate adult store, and almost no one had an entirely uncomplicated positive stance on mainstream pornography.

My all-time favorite public comment moment was put forth by Dianna Davies, an older woman wearing layered sweaters, political pins and an oversized fanny-pack. In what appeared to be an off-the-cuff statement, Davies managed to raise the corners of my mouth and my eyebrows:

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<sup>55</sup> Yazbek, Corinna. City Council Meeting, October 19<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Name unknown, City Council Meeting, October 19<sup>th</sup>.

The new pornography is not a girly calendar on a garage wall in 1940. It is not a pretty girl selling a bottle of coke, sitting next to a nice Scottish Terrier. It is not a Playboy centerfold. It is not a girly magazine, it not a naked lady, it is not a happy hooker, it is not a prostitute with a heart of gold...The new pornography is very violent...towards women...towards children...towards men...I don't care if people have sex upside-down and backwards in a canoe and film it, as long as no one gets hurt..."

The end of this portion of the meetings always came with an almost audible sigh of relief from the entire panel. Attendance was taken. At my first meeting, as a novice, the remainder of the meeting was both tediously repetitive and virtually incomprehensible. Over and over, an issue is announced, a motion is called for discussion and is seconded. The following discussion may as well be spoken in code: sections of the city code are referenced by number only, motions are made to suspend particular rules (also referred to by number). Eventually, all concerns are voiced and a motion is made to approve an action. If this motion is seconded, a vote is cast, majority ruling. I listened closely, so as not to miss any reference to the adult-use zoning ordinances, petrified that I wouldn't know it when I heard it. Finally, Mayor Higgins moved to refer the proposed adult-use ordinances to several subcommittees, including the Planning Board and the ordinance committee. I sat up straight, pen in hand, but there was no further discussion that night. The motion to refer to subcommittees was passed and I found myself back out on the frigid street, walking home in wonder that I'd waited an hour and a half for three applicable sentences.

## **Conflicting Freedoms:**

### **The Impossibility of Content-Neutrality in Adult Business Zoning**

Bill Dwight is not the mayor of Northampton, though I can't think of anyone who would willingly run against him. We meet at Pleasant St. Video, one of Dwight's many places of employment, and meander toward Haymarket Café for a bite to eat and a conversation about pornography. Along the way, at least every third person greets him warmly. "Working in a video store...I guess I *could* know more people, but I'd have to sell crack." I suspect that this magnetism I feel is driven by much more than acquaintance; Dwight is beyond gracious, incredibly smart and sharply ironic in a way that makes one feel she's in on all sorts of secrets. Though I've only recently introduced myself to Dwight, I've known who he is for some time, at first through rental-line small talk alone, but more recently by way of his always entertaining and insightful words at public meetings. In a context which can feel unbearably monotonous, Dwight's public comments light up even the City Council members' faces, turning eyes usually averted to notes, or more often, watches. It could be because Dwight himself is a former City Council member and is expected to hold great insight into the system, though I suspect that is also a sense of great anticipation on the part of observers: you never know what this man will say.

It is a strange situation we find ourselves in at lunch today as Bill has been spending the day taking shifts in a nearby apartment, watching over a close friend succumbing to cancer. A friend from New York accompanies us to lunch, and others stop in and out, supplying updates on morphine levels and group morale. Bill picks at his salad, swirls his roasted red-pepper soup in its cup. "Are you sure you don't need to

reschedule?” I ask, for the umpteenth time. Bill looks at me earnestly and instead thanks me for the distraction.

As of January of 2006, Bill Dwight is no longer a City Councilor. He has passed his ward on to Councilor Maureen Carney, one of the three councilors to oppose the recent legislation of adult-use businesses in Northampton. Bill was one of the Councilors to draft the oft-referenced zoning ordinances applicable to big-box establishments. In public comment of City Council’s November 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, Bill approached the podium one last time to oppose the current legislation. “I am frustrated to hear comparisons being made between the legislation I helped author as justification for those currently being drafted. There is nothing similar here.” According to Dwight, not only was Big Box zoning debated and analyzed far more thoroughly, taking into consideration and incorporating all public concern, but the size-cap set (90,000 sq ft) was a measurement of the exterior structure, not of the internal workings of those establishments.

We’re not allowed to limit anything in the interior, not in any other business downtown or on the highway. No new building is being proposed here...and the size that is being limited is not the size of the structure but the content that’s displayed there...The rules are not content neutral at all. They are special, unprecedented regulations for this community targeting adult material.<sup>57</sup>

In Bill’s time on the council, another adult-use controversy swept the city of Northampton: the prospect of live nude dancing. Actually, “controversy” is probably a strong word for the scuffle, as everyone on the council supported the legislation at the time. Everyone, that is, except Bill Dwight, who was frustrated by the reactionary, fear-based ways in which the law was written. In the state of Massachusetts, and in the United States in general, governments are not legally able to ban adult businesses entirely, under

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<sup>57</sup> Dwight, Bill. Northampton City Council, Public Comment, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.

first amendment protection. At one time, cities attempted to zone adult businesses into areas that were otherwise permanently occupied or on land that could not support a commercial structure: in swampland or landfills for instance. Eventually, the State ruled against what Bill terms “side schemes” and demanded that “reasonable accommodations” must be provided to all businesses, on a “content neutral” basis.<sup>58</sup>

The term “content neutral” has been one of the most commonly disputed and misunderstood in the local debates. It refers to the ways in which government can or cannot legislate businesses based solely on undesirable content. For Northampton to deny a corporation like Capital Video a business permit in a particular space because it “just doesn’t belong” or because community members question the morality of its content is, by definition, unlawful censorship. However, if the content within the space is proven to produce undesirable or dangerous “secondary effects”, the matter can be legislated in the name of protecting the city and its residents. Regardless of legality, it is strange to hear claims from NoPorn and the Council that in this case, adult-use legislation is content neutral legislation, because obviously a business is defined as “adult” based on what is sold inside.

In Northampton, to the ironic delight of the rest of the community, all live nude entertainment (and later, all adult-use businesses over 1000 square feet) were zoned to the Highway Business District, an area which fell within troublemaker Bill’s ward. Not that there was ever any attempt to open a nude-dancing establishment in Northampton, nor will there likely ever be. As Bill puts it: “Strip clubs want to go to depressed economic areas; the most successful strip club in this area, is in the middle of a fucking potato field

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<sup>58</sup>Renton v. Playtime Theatres, Inc. 475 U.S. 41 (1986).

in Whately! They don't go for the most expensive real estate in the whole region. They don't need to, because...because their business will attract people anyway.”

In addition, it is clear that pre-emptive harm reduction through zoning does not occur in all cases in which secondary effects might occur. Dwight has incited more than a few hearty chuckles with his rhetorical public comment requests that Dunkin Donuts, evil purveyors of transfats, be zoned outside of his sightline. Alcohol, tobacco, and artery-hardening cuisine are all scientifically proven to create secondary effects, while the verdict on pornography remains at large. Nonetheless, liquor stores and fast food joints will never be banished to the edges of town. A plentitude of car lots and vacant real estate already create blank, inactive pedestrian voids on King Street, supposed magnets for violence, but we are yet to see a subsequent rise in crime. It becomes clear, upon any close examination, that the fear associated with the incoming adult store has everything to do with content, and will continue to plague the neighborhood regardless of the effects that Capital Video may or may not have on the community.

### **Careful Consideration: Addressing the Technicalities**

Any member of a community can recommend an ordinance or law, although it must then be “sponsored” by a city council member or by the Mayor herself. When a matter comes before the council, it is immediately divvied out to one or more relevant local subcommittees. In the case of Northampton's adult-use business legislation, several propositions were submitted for consideration, including a carefully calculated set of ordinances from NoPorn Northampton. The zoning laws proposed by late September were crafted largely by Northampton's Director of Planning and Development, Wayne

Feiden, in conjunction with land-use lawyers and those sponsoring the ordinances: Mayor Clare Higgins herself and Councilors Marianne LeBarge and Marilyn Richards.<sup>59</sup> The plans were then referred to the Economic Development and Land Use Committee, the Ordinance Committee and the Northampton Planning Board.

The Planning Board serves an especially vital role in ordinances related to zoning. Members are appointed by the Mayor for their diverse understandings of development issues; current members boast backgrounds in law, architecture, business, and politics of all sorts. These sub-committees do not make legislative decisions, but drudge through the often tedious research, discussion, and modification necessary to make a positive or negative recommendation to the Council. In some cases, the subcommittee's vote remains divided; this was one of those cases. Regardless of recommendation, the City Council retains the final word as to whether or not proposed regulation in fact becomes enforceable law. Once zoning laws are passed, however, the Planning Board become the arbiters of all individual development plans, by determining whether the plans conform to local zoning laws, as approved by the City Council.<sup>60</sup>

Every occupied structure in Northampton, whether business-zoned or residential, is approved for a principal use. This designated utilization of the space is "...the main or primary purpose for which a structure is designed, arranged, or intended, or for which it may be used, occupied, or maintained..."<sup>61</sup> Certain primary uses are legally subject to special permitting, for the safety of the city at large.<sup>62</sup> Adult businesses are one of these

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Maureen Carney, 02/09/2007

<sup>60</sup> E-mail Correspondence with Bill Dwight 2/20/2007

<sup>61</sup> <[http://www.e-codes.generalcode.com/codebook\\_frameset.asp?ep=fs&t=ws&cb=2226\\_A](http://www.e-codes.generalcode.com/codebook_frameset.asp?ep=fs&t=ws&cb=2226_A)>

<sup>62</sup> Special permits are required for establishments that serve alcohol, for example.

exceptions. A business is deemed “adult” and thereby subject to adult-use regulations if it is “primarily” engaged in the sale or rental of adult material. This typically qualifies any establishment whose inventory includes 60% or more adult material as an adult-use establishment that must adhere to local and state regulation of adult businesses. Using percentage to determine status, however, has created an x-rated loophole: “sham compliance” through a hoarding of useless non-adult stock, deemed “Spanish Popeye.” This G or PG rated shelf-filler gleans its name from one of the most outrageous cases of sham compliance ever recorded: a Bronx, New York store containing 12,000 X-rated film titles, and 18,000 copies of Popeye cartoons dubbed in Spanish, the latter collecting dust for years in this legally non-adult space. A similar scheme came to a grinding halt in nearby Hadley in July, 2006. The owner of locally despised “smut hut” Adults Only, jilted after the Highway Department condemned the building in the name of highway expansion, moved most of his merchandise to a new location, outside allowable adult-use zoning areas in the city of Hadley. The businessman did this by opening the new shop under the guise of an antique coin retailer, each miniscule piece of currency counting as an item and far outweighing the thousands of pieces of pornography displayed.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, the definition of “adult” material itself is quite ambiguous, and not at all limited to what most of us would deem “pornographic”. According to the United States Code, sexually explicit material includes representation of a number of acts and states of being, whether actual or simulated. Adult-qualifying material can range from hardcore sexual intercourse to scenes (or descriptions) of simulated masturbation

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<sup>63</sup> Merzbach, Scott. Merchant Defends Adult Shop. Hampshire Daily Gazette 07/12/06.

and even simple “graphic exhibition” of the pubic area.<sup>64</sup> In other words, adult material is largely deemed adult or non-adult based on the subjective understanding of the viewer. In Northampton, this process of determination falls solely into the hands of Northampton’s building commissioner, Tony Patillo. Without any prior training or sufficient guidelines, he alone must determine what material qualifies as adult, in order to measure all space occupied by adult material, ensuring that all businesses abide by the adult-use legislation.

### **Exceptions to the Rule: Applicability of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment**

“I hope it won’t offend you, but I do have a favorite sexy magazine in my office.” I have been playing phone tag with Peter Brooks for several weeks and, until that moment, am relieved to finally be climbing the many stairs to his downtown law office. I tense as he bobs his eyebrows flirtatiously, having come to expect a certain level of interpersonal misunderstanding in my line of study. The boundaries between intellectual and intimate are often hard to decipher in sex-talk, especially for those not accustomed to conversing freely, and I begin to recite my boundary-mantra to myself: “I am interested *by* sex, not interested in sex with you.” I needn’t have worried. Brooks slides open a drawer in his office filing cabinet, slowly extracting a thick publication. I laugh as I realize it is an equestrian magazine, the cover photo a dramatic depiction of a strapping star-horse. “What a stud, huh?” he muses.

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<sup>64</sup> Clark, Matthew D. Obscenity, Child Pornography and Indecency, New York: Novinka, 2002.

Peter Brooks is not a subtle man, though neither is he outspoken by nature. From observing him in Council Chambers, I had assumed him to be a staunch and active advocate of First Amendment rights in the Valley. Surprisingly, Brooks is fairly new to Northampton and even newer to municipal politics. A native Midwesterner and long-time NYC resident, he suffered from asthma as a child, an affliction brought on by external stimuli, including high levels of stress. As an adult, the attacks were less frequent, especially since leaving the hustle of New York behind for Northampton's peaceful nature and clear air. One evening, however, Brooks stumbled upon the NoPorn Northampton website, and his visceral fury at such attempted censorship brought his attacks back with a vengeance. He decided to speak his mind, via a 500-word limit comment box on Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter's site. He stayed up all night, composing an open letter to the couple and in the wee hours, he noticed something: his breathing had returned to normal. It occurred to Brooks that if censorship, even on a local level, was important enough to affect his health, he would have to follow his body's lead.<sup>65</sup> Brooks' new blog, Talk Back Northampton, was the first consistent online opposition to NoPorn Northampton's plans. An entertainment lawyer by trade, Brooks returned to the Constitution for guidance.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is a part of the United States Bill of Rights. In short, it protects the freedom to assemble, the freedom to choose and practice any religion, freedom of the press, freedom to disagree with the government, and most often cited, the freedom of speech. The right to free speech is granted, not only within the U.S. Constitution, but through the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Peter Brooks, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

Rights as well, though in many instances, the maintenance of this right is treated as an ideology rather than as a practice. Freedom of speech ensures every individual's right to voice opinion and express her/himself without being censored or penalized.

There are only two types of speech which do not receive First Amendment protection: child pornography and obscenity. Though the ways in which child pornography is defined are often matters of debate, the necessity of its regulation is rarely disputed.<sup>66</sup> As I have mentioned, under federal law pornographic material can be prohibited, not based on content, but based on proven secondary effects. In the case of child pornography, these effects occur most observably in the production of images, through the involvement of children themselves. To fail to qualify for 1<sup>st</sup> amendment protection, child pornography must depict actual children engaged in sexual acts or sexually provocative poses. This includes photos of children taken out of context and technologically morphed in a sexualized manner.<sup>67</sup>

In 1996, through the drafting of the Child Pornography Protection Act, attempts were made to cease 1<sup>st</sup> amendment protection of any sexualized image that appeared to involve or affect minors, including depictions of legal-age models participating in youth themed scenarios and any drawn, painted, or technologically-created sexualized depiction of children. The argument behind this act was one of secondary effects as well; material of this nature was posited as fodder for pedophiles' sexual appetites or potential tools in

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<sup>66</sup> There is a small contingent of individuals who defend child-pornography, whether simply as a tool with which to avoid acting out pedophilial urges, or, more radically, as representation of what can (though thoroughly complicated) be a mutually beneficial and consensual act of love. O'Carroll, Tom. Pedophilia: The Radical Case. London: Alyson Books, 1980. And <[www.nambla.org](http://www.nambla.org)>

<sup>67</sup> Clark, Matthew D. Obscenity, Child Pornography and Indecency. NY: Novinka Books, 2002. Pp. 3-5

the “grooming” process employed by sexual predators. The Supreme Court disagreed, stating that constitutionally, the government cannot “premise legislation on the desirability of controlling a person’s private thoughts” and “may not prohibit speech because it increases the chance that an unlawful act will be committed ‘at some indefinite future time’.” Non-protection of speech can only occur when secondary effects are observable and proven.

Though obscenity is far less easily defined than child-pornography, it remains the only form of speech to which 1<sup>st</sup> amendment protection has been denied, regardless of proven harm. Though there is no historical evidence that our forefathers intended explicit sexual speech to fall outside 1<sup>st</sup> amendment protection, the Supreme Court has ruled that there is an expressive line that should never be crossed, in the name of “the social interest in order and morality.” In order to determine, legally, just where this limit occurs, the Court has devised a three-question checklist, dubbed The Miller Test:

- a) Would the “average person applying contemporary community standards” find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest?
- b) Does the work depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct?
- c) Does the work, taken as a whole, lack serious literary, artistic, political and scientific value?<sup>68</sup>

The first prong of The Miller Test seems clear enough. But doesn’t all hardcore pornographic material exist in order to appeal to and appease the prurient interest? In the 1984 case *Brockett V. Spokane Arcades Inc*, the Supreme Court held that material could not be labeled obscene if it “provoked only normal healthy sexual desires.” To cross the

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<sup>68</sup> Clark, Matthew D. Obscenity, Child Pornography and Indecency. NY: Novinka Books, 2002. Pp. 10-11.

border into the unprotected realm of the obscene, speech must appeal to a “shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion.” By “prurient”, then, the test meant “non-normative”. Feminist Anthropologist Gayle Rubin, in her classic essay *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, examines the ways in which sexual essentialism--the ideology that sex is a naturally occurring phenomenon owed to nature, not social and institutional “nurture,”—has been cemented through hundreds of years of medical, psychiatric and religious sex-panic. Sex is a “marked category” and an oft-used vehicle for displacing a large range of social anxieties. Rubin outlines an ideological formulation which is applicable in the case of NoPorn Northampton and in almost any discourse regarding sexuality: “the need to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex.” While there is perpetual debate over where exactly to draw this line, one would be hard-pressed to find any sexual discourse in which it did not exist. This ideological hierarchy of sexual acceptability forms a “domino theory of sexual peril,” a broken barrier could mean ultimate ethical chaos as all kinds of deviant activities and identities “skitter[ed] across”. It is pornography and public sex which represent spreading cracks in Northampton’s stately barrier. According to NoPorn, Capital Video could very well serve to unleash all sorts of horrific sexual extremes including pedophilia, violent rape and AIDS.

Until 1962, depiction of same-sex sexuality fell under the obscenity umbrella; today it mostly applies to extreme kink and fetishism. Once again, marginalized desires and sexualities can be criminalized while the lusts of the “normal” are protected. The second prong of The Miller Test is my personal favorite, beloved for its extreme flexibility. It goes without saying that pornographic material is depicting sexual conduct,

so the question remains: Is the conduct appropriate? The determination of obscenity can be pared down to two key words within this section: “patently offensive”.

### **Patently Offensive: The Regulation of Non-Normative Sexuality**

So who (aside from building commissioner Tony Patillo) determines whether depictions of sex acts are appropriate, acceptable, or safe? Bill Dwight has spoken out at several meetings voicing concern for Pleasant St. Video. A local institution, Pleasant St. carries a fair amount of sexually explicit material. While they do have a “smut” folder, containing classic porn film titles, most of this material is dispersed throughout the store: the documentary section, French, German, and Japanese sections, entire director partitions, and of course, the LGBT shelves, now all fall under adult legislation. Measured in the manner designated in Northampton’s new adult use legislation<sup>69</sup>, every square foot of Pleasant St is now “adult” except for the counter space and the children’s section. Representatives from Modern Marvel Comics, Movie Gallery, and several other local retail spaces have also voiced concern. When I asked Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter whether they feared the possibility of good-intentioned legislation seeping into other spaces, they seemed amused. They informed me that legislation of this nature is not mandatorily enforced. “No one will be walking into responsible business spaces with a ruler,” Jendi added.

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<sup>69</sup> Space is to be measured by square foot so that if one piece of adult material is on a shelving system, the entire shelving system is now measurable as adult, as well as the aisle in front of it, and any shelving facing or attached to the “contaminated” space.

It's true. In many instances, legislation of this nature is passed, but enforced only selectively. In Northampton's case, this ordinance was created solely to control heteronormative fantasy purveyors, but expecting that such legislation will never be used against other, more vulnerable, groups is making an assumption that Northampton is forever stabilized as a difference-friendly utopia. In 2007, the Mayor of Northampton is openly lesbian, and at least one member of the city council is an openly gay man. As Bet Power puts it "I think that the gay leadership that we have made a mistake because they didn't have foresight about what would happen after their term in office. Because conceivably, the mayor's office could return to heterosexual control..."<sup>70</sup>

I am extremely concerned with the ways in which obscenity law and other policing of sexuality and sexual material always makes vulnerable those queer spaces/ queer communities which are least accepted. Ordinances are not mandatorily enforced but once legislation of this kind exists, any public complaint or governmental shift could allow the policing of queer space. In fact, NoPorn's campaign, in itself, began its fight by denouncing queer bodies and sex, if "accidentally".

Originally, Capital Video was meant to include viewing booths, a form of private-public space noted for its appeal to gay men looking for NSA sex. Would these viewing booths have transformed Capital Video into queer space? Heterosexual-aimed public-sex spaces often become queer hubs. The ordinance created directly in response to Capital's efforts at opening condemns "adult material" regardless of content. Queer material is designated adult far more easily than straight film and print, and ordinances of this nature are often enforced selectively to specifically target queer spaces. Does this alliance in

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Bet Power, October, 2007.

vulnerability make this space queer? Or at least mark this battle queer? If society's vision of mainstream heteronormative sexuality is monogamous, reproductive, heterosexual marriage, privately contained, then isn't a public sex space of any kind inherently queer? Is all queerness expelled through the elements of this business which are corporate, impersonal, and in opposition to radicalism?

I ponder these questions as I listen to members of Northampton's Planning Board cite the perception of safety for local women as crucial to the health of the city and at odds with the nature of an adult-themed store. Ironic, then, as I shiver toward my car, that I hear these same voices above me, timber changed from strained tedium to boyish lilt. "We're going for a beer and you're invited!" I haven't yet met these men and I am unsure if the invitation is directed at me. I peak over my shoulder cautiously, and must appear frightened, alone in the 11 pm-deserted bus station parking lot. "Don't worry," one calls "you *know* us." "I know that you're the planning board..." "But you don't know what we're *planning* to do!" A general snickering echoes down the stairwell at the cleverness of this sexual innuendo. "Oh. My. God." I reply and they quickly snap back into line, apologizing and asking about my project. I am not easily offended, but I am shocked by people's ability to switch so effortlessly from one ideology to another. How is it possible to spend hours lobbying for adult-use legislation, claiming a need for protection and respect for women and their vulnerabilities, only to stand in a group, ten feet above a real-live woman in a dark alley, employing bawdy insinuation and suggesting drinks? Perhaps my reaction would not have been so strong if earlier the same night, I hadn't been backed against a council chambers wall by a sleazy CBS news reporter, his "official" questioning moving from my position in the debates to his long-time affinity

for red-heads, of which I am one. If feminist sentiment is behind this city's fear of pornography, perhaps it should broaden its view.

### **Allowing for NIMBYism in an Economically Striated Community**

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, City Council public comment was launched by a striking middle-aged woman of Puerto-Rican descent. In a moving speech, she cited the ways in which the constitution almost always serves only the powerful and is discarded when it proves inconvenient. She cited the president's prohibition of the publication of images of dead American soldiers returning home in caskets, while outlining the ways in which privacy and due process are so often discarded in the name of protection and patriotism. While repulsed by the idea of a porn store in Northampton, she expressed feeling more strongly about the maintenance of the constitution:

Unlike our president, I don't want my city council circumventing laws or making new ones in then name of what it deems "good for us". To move this business further from town sends a message to people who love in that area that they are not as important as the residents who live closer to town. That seems elitist to me. If you approve this ordinance you are taking a step toward creating a ghetto on the outskirts of town and that to me seems far worse than tolerating a business any of us despise. Neither the right, nor the left, should legislate what they believe to be morality or patriotism.<sup>71</sup>

Bill Dwight reiterated this point:

If we accept that assertion laid out in the latest iteration of the zoning<sup>72</sup>, and I don't, then why is this type of enterprise any less injurious to those living on Piebrook Curve or Barrett St, particularly since we are allowing stores up to

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<sup>71</sup> Northampton City Council, Public Comment November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> The iteration that adult stores and big box corporations are inherently harmful entities.

90,000 square feet to open up near these folks? How are these people any less deserving of your consideration?

It is this point which most clearly illustrates the role of economics in legislative processes like this one. The “secondary effects” so often cited in legislative literature as related to the presence of adult businesses span a wide range of concern, most notably effects on property value and nearby business and the protection of women and children’s physical and psychological safety. These effects are grouped together and presented in such a way that it becomes logical to assume that banishment to the edges of town through zoning will solve both sets of issues. In truth, this solves one problem: it allows for the maintenance of high property values for those neighborhoods in which people own fabulous homes, and therefore pay fabulous property taxes. One of the reasons why violence and blight as effects of pornography sales are often cited but are rarely scientifically proven, is that adult stores are almost always located in already low-income areas, areas which are often affordable precisely because of the crime and blight which already exist there. This is exactly what the zoning in Northampton will preclude: all “evil” porn corporations will be located where they will cause the least damage to the economy, regardless of the safety of Northampton’s less popular neighborhoods.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> A comparable level of controversy, though far less sexy and thereby far less high-profile, was occurring in Northampton during the NoPorn scandals as well. Green Street, Northampton’s historic downtown outside of downtown, and placement of much of Northampton’s most affordable housing, was fighting complete displacement, in the name of Smith College expansion. Besides being a tragic displacement of numerous long-time businesses and tenants (incapable of paying downtown rent) this process was helped along considerably by the City Council and fire department. Over the past 20 years, Smith College has purchased over \$9.7 million in local property, making it one of Northampton’s highest property tax payers. Thurlow, Kendra. *Green Street Runs Dry*. Valley Advocate, 3/29/07.

In The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy, Lisa Duggan illustrates the ways in which battles that seem to be about sex are often more deeply rooted in economic concern. In November of 1997, The Women's Studies program at SUNY New Paltz sponsored a conference entitled "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom". The conference offered a plethora of academic workshops on the topic, several of which were hands-on demonstrations and performances related to consensual S/M, the joys of sex toys, and queer sexuality. Almost immediately, a diverse squad of right-wing conservative politicians, activists, public figures and SUNY trustees were lobbying to have the President of the college, Roger Bowen, removed, despite his having virtually no role in the conference whatsoever.

While this controversy eventually garnered national coverage, it was almost without exception posited as yet another battle in the epic "culture wars," the phase of combat over the appropriateness and legitimacy of the study of sex. Missing from this analysis entirely was an examination of the ways in which the New York public university system was undergoing neoliberal reconstruction from the top down, led by conservative governor George Pataki. Public institutions of higher learning are expensive endeavors, and are largely funded by the taxpayer. Pataki's delegation was determined to reduce spending and reform higher education. Through the micro-management of public universities, college could be transformed into a more effective institution through which to create consumers and cookie-cutter workers of the future, and at a lower public cost, a doubly appealing contribution to the success of New York neoliberalism.

As was illustrated in campaigns for welfare reform before this, “the best way to reduce expenditures of tax-levied funds, the logic goes, is to demonize the beneficiaries of that spending.” While culturally diverse urban public colleges in New York were publicly slammed as pillowy enablers for lazy and underqualified minorities, schools in upstate and suburban New York State had a different sort of vulnerable edge. Turning the public against progressive public schools (and those, like President Bowen, who opposed the commodification of education) through sexual panic was much more effective than convincing an historically Democratic state to support the shrinkage of educational funding solely in the name of economic growth.<sup>74</sup>

### **What *About* the Children?**

I meet Adam Shelffo at Woodstar Café. He is ahead of me in line for coffee when I arrive, so I send an awkward wave through the tightly packed room. From my observations at town meetings, I had assumed Shelffo to be quite shy, and I am delighted to find myself sitting next to an ever-subtle outpouring of wry humor. Shelffo is a man of all trades: former high school English teacher, purveyor of high tech computer programs, father of two young boys, and most famously in the NoPorn debates, a local blogger. I have come to admire him considerably through observation at public meetings and I am anxious to speak firsthand. As the only member of Northampton’s community to publicly change his mind, Shelffo has been hailed as a premium voice of reason within a highly emotional debate. His primary focus is the protection of his two young boys, but he no longer believes that Capital Video’s presence will cause them inherent harm. As a former

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<sup>74</sup> Duggan, Lisa. The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Pp. 22-42.

English teacher, he is well-versed in the art of research and was entirely unsatisfied by the often uncited, unscientific “proof” of porn-related harm on the NoPorn website.

“Being a parent comes with an ever growing list of things to fear. You have to prioritize. If you are going to tell me that I should be scared of something, there better be more substance to your argument than what you think will pass muster in court.”

While Shelffo and I don’t worry too much in our conversation about the city of Northampton, perched and teetering on the brink of a “slippery slope,” we do express concern in regards to the ever-tightening nature of NoPorn Northampton’s policing of sexuality. I have become more troubled over time, as hardcore gay male porn, all BDSM, and depictions of non-monogamy have all been employed as examples of villainous sexual expression. According to Andrew, the most recent turn proves most bothersome yet. After the passing of the adult-use legislation in Northampton, NoPorn.org’s popularity began to wane. There was no longer active public controversy on the topic of legal pornography in Northampton, but there was a new brand of smut-related fear and outrage coursing through the city.

Within the course of several months in the Valley, two local teachers had been arrested on child-pornography charges. In November, Amherst High School teacher of over 20 years, Ronald T. Garney, was arrested on three counts of child pornography possession. In February, preschool and Sunday school teacher Edgar “Ned” Selavka of neighboring Easthampton, was indicted on 11 counts of child pornography possession. While both of these men deny ever having had sexual contact with children, parents and fellow teachers flew into a panic.

Aware of the newly stoked public desperation, NoPorn resumed posting, sometimes several articles a day, now latching more visibly onto child pornography and molestation as fodder. In an interview with City Councilor Maureen Carney, she expressed to me that she was also made uncomfortable from the onset by the rhetoric surrounding the protection of children. For decades, this has been the primary question driving moral panic: what about the children? According to Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter, pornography is directly linked to pedophilia, as those addicted to pornography allegedly often require more and more radical psychosexual stimulation. Testimony on their website included Co-Director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania, Anne Layden's, theory of "Pornography Distortion," a set of beliefs received by the viewer while they are immersed in the ultra-receptive and vulnerable state of arousal and orgasm. According to Layden:

An example of Pornography Distortion would include beliefs such as "Sex is not about intimacy, procreation or marriage. Sex is about predatory self-gratification, casual recreation, body parts, violence, feces, strangers, children, animals and using women as entertainment."

Through hundreds of snippets like this one, NoPorn links all pornography with real-life misogyny, violence, and pedophilia, in effect excusing sexual offenders as mere victims of psychological programming. The complexities of sex-offenders' relationships with porn are largely glossed over, oversimplified and produced as evidence that porn causes destructive behavior. In reality, millions of men and women own and view pornography, the nature of which is sought out in accordance with personal preference. That Ted Bundy watched violent porn does not prove that violent porn creates homicidal tendencies; it seems plausible that Ted Bundy enjoyed particularly violent and sadistic porn because he was a violent individual with an intense pre-existing hatred of women.

Children often tend to be the golden ticket in anti-smut struggles such as this one. There is no greater fear than that of child-predators. And even the most sex-politically progressive adults have been conditioned to worry that their children will be forever scarred by early exposure to any form of sexual explicitness. NoPorn Northampton, by publicly proposing a possible link between the incoming pornography store and a resulting higher concentration of sex offenders in Northampton, did nothing to ease the discomfort of already nervous parents in the community. Whether an adult store will draw villainous perverts or not, the suggestion is not easily forgotten by wary moms and dads.

Unfortunately, child sexual predators are not drawn in and contained within sexualized bubbles, set apart from children. An alternate view, gracefully put forth at a September 21<sup>st</sup> City Council meeting by Carole Giselle, owner of Oh, My! Sensuality Boutique, is that pedophiles do not visit adult businesses at all, and do not view adult material, because they have no sexual interest in adults. Say what you will about the evils of the mainstream porn industry, but you will not find commercial depictions of underage sex produced or sold in any Capital Video establishment. Pedophilial contexts are far less predictable. Child pornography is created by those who use it, is never commercially available and is rarely distributed outside of the perilous anonymity of the World Wide Web.

Bill Dwight made an excellent point regarding the protection of children at the November 2<sup>nd</sup> City Council meeting. Why weren't the anti-porn ordinances referred out to the Youth Commission? A special committee created explicitly to give the underage a voice in rulings which affect them, the Commission was not consulted at all, despite non-

stop reference to the safety of young people in relation to pornography. “All this talk about protecting our children from the possibility of walking past a store that will be pretty demure when we come down to it, and no one thought to ask them what they thought?”

The answer, quite simply, is that adult Northampton residents and officials were embarrassed enough to discuss such “private” matters amongst themselves. It is one thing to speak of protecting the children, but another thing altogether to afford them the autonomy to judge the danger for themselves. Adults are petrified that our children are, in fact, sexual beings. NoPorn’s argument that Capital Video’s signage, advertising the associated website Amazing.Net, will entice children into the sordid realm of Internet pornography became ludicrous the moment they posted their first nopornnorthampton.org yard sign. Their own website, advertised to people of all ages, provides links to the foulest sites on the Web, provides definitions of pertinent vocabulary words like “bukkake” and republishes photos, with genitals censored, depicting racist and misogynistic propaganda. When Andrew Shelffo approached the Council Chambers podium at the final Council meeting regarding Capital Video, he discussed the initial trepidation he’d felt in anticipation of having to explain the pornography store to his young sons and the reasons why his views had changed:

...thanks to the recent protests, the headlines in the news, and some mailings we’ve received, I’ve had to have initial conversations with my older son about what pornography is. And I’ve realized that having that conversation is important and represents an opportunity to teach my children about some of the more uncomfortable things in the world. The fact of the matter is that pornography of all stripes exists in our society and in Northampton. The proposed regulations will do nothing to change that. And the suggestion that the regulations will protect us

is fear-mongering at its worst...Respectfully, I ask that you not pass the ordinance that focuses on the size and location of adult businesses.<sup>75</sup>

### **It All Comes Down to This**

An hour into the November 2<sup>nd</sup> City Council discussion, my ears perked to the words “adult-use.” The mayor announced several minor amendments to the ordinances voted on two weeks prior, including clarifying language regarding secondary effects. Councilman Paul Spector, previously in favor of the ordinances, surprised the Council by announcing that he would be voting against the ordinances in this reading. After listening to an hour of credible and impassioned public opinion, it was clear to him that the Northampton community was not overwhelmingly in favor of the ordinances. In fact, opinion now seemed to split fairly evenly down the center. “I do not believe that an 8 to 1 vote would accurately represent the difficulty and difference of opinion which has characterized this issue.” With Spector shifted, the vote passed 6 to 3 with a roll-call style vote. Then, without pause, the committee moved onto an ordinance declaring pay increase for public officials. I sat, confused, for several moments, as people grabbed for their coats and shuffled wearily to the door.

“That’s really it?” I whispered to the woman sitting next to me.

“That’s it.” She replied, “Kinda anti-climactic, huh?” I don’t know what I’d expected. I’d wanted a formal pronouncement, perhaps something starting with “Hear ye!” I’d braced myself for tearful cries from opponents, expected hearty cheers from the supporters. I’d waited for a moment of silence, a collective sigh and maybe a subdued chuckle rumbling across the council. At least a tight-lipped handshake between Adam

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Shelffo, City Council Meeting, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.

Cohen and Andrew Shelffo? But by the time I'd reached the door, the emotional charge I'd come to associate with Council Chambers was gone entirely.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **The Web Wars:**

#### **Sexual Discourse in the Information Age**

I remember my first experience with Internet porn very clearly, in part because it was also my first experience with the Internet itself, outside of the stagnant, highly chaperoned environment of my elementary school library. My next-door neighbor was the first person I knew to get dial-up in his bedroom. I hopped on my sparkle-painted huffy ten-speed when I heard the news, scrambled up the stairs to his room and sat cross-legged and wide-eyed on a chair behind him. We stared at a search engine home page for several minutes before typing anything, dizzy with the sheer magnitude of naughty possibilities. “What should we type?” he finally asked me, uncharacteristically shy. I glared, pulling my chubby cheeks into what I believed to be a look of sophistication. “Oh, the stupidity of boys,” I sighed. “Type ‘sex’!” We perused nervously for what seemed like hours before being called to our respective wholesome-hippie family dinners. The connection was slow and each naked girl loaded a millimeter at a time, from the top down, Kye and I attempting to act nonchalant as their nipples loaded, gripping our chairs with both hands.

In the days before MySpace and dating sites, ChatBox became our cyber-poison of choice. A rudimentary group chat site, my junior high friends and I would sit for

hours, chatting with creepy teenage boys looking to “cyber”<sup>76</sup>. It felt dangerous, and maybe it was, but none of us ever gave our real names or considered meeting people from the Internet in person. The web, for us, was a relatively safe and private way to acquire a sexual vocabulary and to become acquainted with our desires. In a town that offered virtually no sexual education to adolescents, the Internet filled in the gaps in our understanding of sex acts, protection, and the many cosmetic and sensory variations of the most “unmentionable” anatomy.

Ten years later, the Internet has developed into the ultimate form of instant gratification. With high-speed wireless access, sexy images no longer require five minutes loading time; one can flip through sites as quickly as pages of a magazine, searching for key content or just browsing links. Chances are, with very little effort, just about everyone will find what turns them on. The purchasing of pornography has never been a social event for most, and is a cause of public shame for many. Why spend money and be seen perusing those aisles befitting your particular prurient interests when you can instead browse comparable material on the internet for free, download what you love, even burn it to DVD yourself?

While the Internet seemed sheer intellectual and erotic blessing to me and other young people determined to self-educate in the realm of carnal knowledge, it is precisely this freedom that has transformed the Web into the newest site for sexual panic. In 2007, almost every child in the country has access to the Internet, in all its sleazy, informational glory. Six-year olds have their own e-mail addresses. Disney and other child-oriented corporations have online games for kids as young as two. It is beyond nerve-racking for

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<sup>76</sup> Short for Cybersex. A verb signifying the act of engaging in masturbation while exchanging sexual fantasies or engaging in back-and-forth-role playing online.

most parents to think of these little ones being exposed to gyrating XXX pop-up ads, and while a porn-store in your neighborhood may offend you, a virtually unlimited and continuously growing porn store in your family room is downright terrifying.

It seems appropriate, then, that the majority of the debate over pornographic material has moved into the abstract realm as well: serious emotional and moral discourse broadcasted through the World Wide Web. The Internet has profoundly affected the nature of political discourse, allowing most every citizen the tools necessary to broadcast his/her opinions worldwide. This newly developing ability to reach millions through blog<sup>77</sup> entries written from the comfort of your own living room couch has complicated the ways in which we understand communicative ethics. As a large portion of Internet activity occurs anonymously, it is often easy to type things one would never say aloud. It is also easy to forget that there is a real live person behind each IP address. According to a recent Washington Post article online, anger and hostility have become new chic political tools:

No wonder Americans are infatuated with anger: It is democratic...The blogosphere often is, as one blogger joyfully says, "an electronic primal scream." And everywhere there is the histrionic fury of ordinary people venting in everyday conversations...Anger often is, Wood says, "a spectacle to be witnessed by an appreciative audience, not an attempt to win over the uncommitted."<sup>78</sup>

While the Internet, in many ways, promotes those ideals which America holds dearest—democracy, meritocracy, human rights, and pluralism<sup>79</sup>—it also serves as a

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<sup>77</sup> Shorthand for "Weblog," an online diary or personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page.

<sup>78</sup> Will, George F. "Anger is All The Rage." 3/25/2007, <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/23/AR2007032301589\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/23/AR2007032301589_pf.html)>

<sup>79</sup> Klein, Marty, Ph.D. America's War on Sex: The Attack on Law, Lust and Liberty. London: Praeger Publishers, 2006. pg 108

medium through which to tear one another to bits. This is partly because although (or because) there is an almost immeasurable amount of information on the Internet, communities form in pockets around similar interests. It is easy to find an interactive community of like-minded individuals online, to preach your politics to the virtual choir without opposition. Stumbling upon a community based around very different modes of thinking can be quite a shock to the system, and often creates a sense of urgent anger and entitlement.<sup>80</sup>

As of 2005, the Web boasted over 11.5 billion pages to explore, and that number is rising exponentially.<sup>81</sup> The NoPorn Northampton site alone could boost that statistic considerably. A phenomenally impressive collection of primary and secondary porn-related material, nopornnorthampton.org boasts a whopping 280,980 words, strategically linked to one another in an awe-inspiring informational network.<sup>82</sup> Entries are organized by date and by common theme, and are also navigable through a personalized site-wide search engine and an ever-present sidebar containing the most pertinent information. That said, it is impossible to observe, let alone absorb, even a fraction of the site's content without dedicating at least several days to the cause. This inundation of information is frustrating and overwhelming for those attempting to understand or analyze each entry individually. If volume proved accuracy, noporn.org would prove beyond any doubt that

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<sup>80</sup> Schroeder, Patricia, "The Virtue of Civility," Shambala Sun. <http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1421&Itemid=247> January, 2005.

<sup>81</sup> Klein, Marty, Ph.D. America's War on Sex: The Attack on Law, Lust and Liberty. London: Praeger Publishers, 2006. Pg. 107

<sup>82</sup> Each new entry contains numerous links to previous entries, embedded in the text itself.

pornography is inherently and unavoidably harmful. Unfortunately, the site gathers many of its “facts” from questionable sources and occasionally foregoes citation altogether.<sup>83</sup> The effect then, is an overwhelming amount of material supporting a group of ideas, but only questionable sources to back it up. Material on the site is sometimes at odds with NoPorn’s own stated beliefs, condemning all sexual material entirely and delving into the realm of religious condemnation. Thus, attempting to summarize this content is a feat I would never attempt, though I can certainly take a stab at their larger-scale motivation.

NoPorn Northampton does not like pornography. Initially, they did not like the idea of pornography being purchased and viewed in “private” booths near their neighborhood. Fear that a pornography superstore could considerably lower the value of their recently purchased home led them to probe available material on the topic. Their stated motivations and strategies have wavered significantly since that time, extending beyond the financial to target the moral. Whether these variations have been purposefully employed as strategic “goal-post shifts” is unclear. It is entirely possible that this evolution has occurred naturally, as the couple explored this complex and emotionally-driven set of issues for the first time.

As the NoPorn site grew, it became home to anti-porn material and sentiment from every corner of the virtual world as well as an amalgamation of published texts, legal documents, periodicals and case studies. What was once an effort to prevent Capital Video from moving into 135 King St is now an effort to enlighten those who are

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<sup>83</sup> Doug Schubert (pseudonym) is a frequent contributor to the MoPorn site, through a series entitled “Taking Stock”. In Taking Stock Part V: Fake Science and Taking Stock Part IV: Fake Experts, Schubert probes the seemingly impenetrable black hole of information, uncovering inconsistent studies, withheld information and self-created “experts.” <<http://www.mopornnorthampton.com/>>

ignorant to the negative effects of porn production and/or consumption. The web-site's side bar entitled "What You Can Do" encourages action not merely against the porn industry, but against perceived "collaborators" as well: hotels who offer in room pornographic pay-per-view, Monster.com for listing jobs available in adult retail, online domain name registrars for selling domains to pornographic sites. Most recently added to those critical actions urged is a protest of "The Republican's association with 'free speech' freelancers who don't fight fair."<sup>84</sup>

### **The Politics of Irony: Making Points vs. Making Fun**

I exit the comfortable bubble that is Northampton via Interstate-91. I am headed toward Springfield, the closest thing to "the big city" that this valley has to offer, to meet with Jeff Hobbs, co-administrator of NoPorn Northampton's greatest online oppositional hub: MoPorn Northampton.com. Since last June, MoPorn has offered satirical commentary on the content of Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter's website, inadvertently gathering a devoted handful of readers and, eventually, casual contributors, along the way. Over time, the site has become less ironic, morphing into a forum for those fed up with NoPorn, and more precisely, fed up with Adam and Jendi. Like many of the participants in the local debates, Jeff and his girlfriend Jennifer Ruggieri had very little previous experience with the politics of pornography, and very little reason to advocate for an oversized, corporate purveyor of particularly questionable media.

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<sup>84</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2007/03/08/king-and-queen-of-mopornnorthampton-savagery-do-freelance-work-for-republican-masslive-explicit-language.aspx>>

But, Jeff and Jennifer have a dog.<sup>85</sup> It was this furry pup who led the couple up and down the streets around their home on daily walks, and it was on these walks that the couple began to notice the NoPorn Northampton signs. The signs, planted furtively on the front lawn of a gorgeous Victorian “mansion” on the corner of King and Summer Streets, piqued Jeff and Jennifer’s curiosity, and upon their return home, they logged on for the first time. It was through NoPorn that Jeff and Jennifer first heard of Capital’s plans for 135 King St, and though they were not excited by the prospect, they were even less enthusiastic about NoPorn’s approach. Says Jeff, “It’s a hard position to take because...they make some good points here and there. I feel for women--and men--okay no, *mostly* women--that are stuck in this...”<sup>86</sup> But it has proven difficult in this debate to disagree with NoPorn, without being accused of harboring pro-pornography sentiment:

The whole shame factor, the shaming of his “opponents”... You can’t disagree with [Adam’s] argument *unless* you love porn. That’s the argument that follows. ‘Porny porn porn porn! You must love porn so much *because* you love porn, Pornmaster73@hotmail.com!’ It’s just constant insinuation! You can’t disagree with him for intellectual reasons or for free speech issues or free trade, or separation between government and commerce...

Balanced atop high pub-style stools, Jeff and I struggle to maintain an appropriate volume, not too loud as to scare the bustling business crowd on their lunch breaks with talk of triple-X footage, loud enough to have our thoughts recorded into the high-tech ipod recorder that Jeff brought along. It is the volume of my laugh that repeatedly needs checking; Jeff lives up to his online funny-man persona. “This isn’t a sissy blog fight anymore, *which* on the scale of human conflict is somewhere along the lines of having a

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<sup>85</sup> Her name is Rosie Winterbutt Muddypaw. She may be contacted through her website: <[www.missmuddypaw.com](http://www.missmuddypaw.com)>

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Jeff Hobbs, 3/29/07.

slap-fight on a mall escalator...It's not like the most manly thing to be like," he pantomimes furious typing and pushing glasses up the bridge of his nose, "'oh yeah???' Well *you* suck!!'" While I narrow my eyes at Jeff's unintentional gender political faux-pas, equating "manliness" with direct action, I can't help but chuckle at his self-deprecating antics. Though Jeff himself bought the online domain that would become MoPorn<sup>87</sup>, he turned the creative maintenance over to his girlfriend, Jennifer Ruggieri, coincidentally also funny. At the time, Jeff was teaching computer science to hill-town high schoolers and knew that getting publicly involved in such a debate would probably not be a wise professional choice.

Then, in a July 17th entry entitled "What Lies Behind Capital Video's Meriden Porn Shop," NoPorn's Adam Cohen took an investigative approach befitting an episode of CSI; toting a high quality camera, he and Jendi explored the premises of Meriden's Capital Video store, eventually encountering "numerous blue gloves".<sup>88</sup> Though it was unclear as to what these gloves had been used for, photographic documentation was taken and showcased on the NoPorn site, as evidence of inappropriate public sex acts occurring in the vicinity of adult establishments. This was immediately followed by excerpts from Squirt.org, an online hook-up site praising Meriden's Capital Video store as a possible interactive sexual space:

Great place. I have sucked a few nice cocks at this place. Generally have had a great experience with guys around 30-40 yrs old. Usually go after I leave the office around 4pm on thursdays and fridays.

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<sup>87</sup> He initially purchased the domain as a joke, not intending to do much with it. The purchase price was five dollars for a year. This is MoPorn's only monetary expense to date, in contrast with NoPorn, which claims to have spent somewhere around \$20,000 on their campaign thus far.

<sup>88</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/search.aspx?q=blue%20gloves&sc=1>>

Visited from west coast last Wed 9/13, around noon. [Glory hole] was patched up, (damn), but stuck around and had a guy follow me into a booth, he was doing me, when the glass window beckoned, and another hot man appeared, he came over and face fucked me while the other guy sucked me...HOT!

Went there once before with my wife, sucked a few cocks, it was hot. Does anyone know how Sundays evenings are? We are looking for some fun...

What NoPorn Northampton fails to include in this expose' of public sex spaces, is the variety of public spaces also used for such purposes. Gyms, parks, bike paths, parking lots, truck stops, movie theaters, public restrooms, and train stations are equally praised as spaces allowing for semi-public sex. Also advertised on Squirt.org as prime local gay-male cruising sites are the Northampton Bike Trail, Universal Health and Fitness, Northampton Athletic Club, Childs and Pulaski Parks and the University of Massachusetts Campus Center basement bathroom. Public sex is everywhere; at least in designated sexual environments, participants are restricted to those of consenting age, and are much less likely to encounter homophobic violence:

As [LGBT historian] Allan Berube has argued, commercial sex establishments have often taken public erotic spaces (parks, truck stops, restrooms) that were frequently unsafe (due to muggers, bashers, cops) and recreated them in a safer public environment: Central Park's dirt paths are simulated in a bathhouse's dark maze, a truck stop becomes a disembodied semi trailer inside Fred Halsted's sex club, and public bathroom glory holes are replicated in a video store's buddy booths.<sup>89</sup>

To the dismay of the general Northampton public, holding a collective breath, the true nature of the notorious blue gloves was never determined. I, along with several participants in the online debates, have suggested that perhaps they were used for

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<sup>89</sup> Hoffman, Wayne. *Skipping the Life Fantastic: Coming of Age in the Sexual Devolution in Policing Public Sex*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows. Boston: South End Press, 1996. p. 347

cleaning or maintenance purposes, especially as they are pictured lying in pairs alongside a discarded garden hose.<sup>90</sup> In fact, industrial blue gloves like those found are most often used by painters, HVAC techs<sup>91</sup>, and lawn maintenance workers and probably wouldn't be a comfortable choice for intimate purposes. While gloves used for safer-sex purposes are sometimes sold in multi-colored variety-packs, in blue or in black, they are most readily available in neutral shades and are constructed from a thinner, more body-compatible latex, vinyl, or nitrile. While I never condone littering, at least if they *had* been used for sexual purposes, the wearers had engaged in safer-sex of some kind. Regardless, this outlandish display of determination on NoPorn's part to obtain objective evidence of "secondary effects" destroyed the last of Jeff and Jennifer's ambivalence. "We were like 'these blue gloves are scandalous; we're gonna get in on that!'"<sup>92</sup> Their sarcastic reaction, catapulted them headlong into what I have begun to term "The Web Wars."

The next morning, MoPorn had posted a single photo-shopped image. The picture displayed a bearded and well-endowed leather-clad man standing roadside below a highway sign reading "mopornnorthampton.com" and holding what appeared to be dirty industrial blue gloves. A flurry of entries followed, effectively placing MoPorn on the public radar. Adam Cohen initially seemed pleased, posting a link on NoPorn.org with the quip, "You know you've truly arrived when you get parodied. NoPornNorthampton welcomes a new website to the debate, mopornnorthampton.com. Mo' Porn is a creation

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<sup>90</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2006/07/17/what-lies-behind-capital-videos-meriden-porn-shop.aspx>>

<sup>91</sup> HVAC is an acronym for heating, ventilating, and air conditioning

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Jeff Hobbs, 3/29/07.

of Jeff Hobbs. It is "dedicated to free speech, free trade, and most of all, filthy dirty blue gloves."<sup>93</sup>

Jeff and Jennifer were not alone in their frustrations with the NoPorn site. Throughout MoPorn's first few months, community critique of NoPorn's tactics began to increase. This slow trickle of incoming rhetorical challenges quickly snowballed as Adam Cohen's responses took on an undeniably condescending tone. In September, 2006, concerned citizen Aaron Archambeault wrote an open letter to The Daily Hampshire Gazette, requesting that NPN be "fair with the facts in the debate over the porn store."<sup>94</sup> This was a reaction to an article prominently featured on the site which linked pornography as a primary motivating factors in rape and child-sexual abuse cases, specifically citing the case of serial child rapist/murderer Gary Bishop.

Although Mr. Bishop appears to be confessing to a plausible result of porn consumption, Mr. Archambeault dismisses it as "obviously a case of someone who knows they have carried through a heinous crime, yet cannot place the blame on himself." I guess Mr. Archambeault (who gives no credentials) just has superior insight into these matters than Dr. Cline, a Licensed Clinical Psychologist who has treated hundreds of sex addicts, sex offenders, and other individuals with sexual illnesses.<sup>95</sup>

Thus began a pattern of back and forth online banter which would culminate in abandoned manners, unfounded accusations, and eventually unnecessarily personal attacks. In October, Northampton resident Robin Maltz's letter to the Gazette echoed the concerns of many locals: "I do not appreciate being treated as if I have no sexual autonomy. We, the citizens of Northampton, do not need our desire regulated and spoken for in an attempt to keep one pornography store out of our city." Adam Cohen's response

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<sup>93</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/search.aspx?q=moporn>> 8/14/2006

<sup>94</sup> Archambeault, Aaron, Letter to the Editor. Daily Hampshire Gazette. 9/12/06

<sup>95</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/search.aspx?q=gary%20bishop>>

was one of the first displays of what would become trademark debate tactics, most prominently dismissal and condescension.

She agrees [that] "the porn industry is corrupt, sexist and exploitative." She also "take[s] issue with the proposed location of Capital Video" at 135 King Street...Ms. Maltz is less approving of our recent mass-mailed open letter to Barry and Annette Goldberg, the property owners of 135 King Street...Since the making of porn hurts porn workers, and the consumption of porn can damage how the viewer relates to others (particularly in the case of porn addicts), the value of autonomy is not the only important value here. Compassion and concern for others are also important values. We are asking Ms. Maltz to add these to her thinking.<sup>96</sup>

But it was NoPorn's confrontational interactions with MassLive blogger Andrew Shelffo which caused the biggest raucous of all. Shelffo, a man whom I have found to be one of the most logical and unemotional voices in these debates, was vocal from an early point in his opposition to Capital Video's plans to move to King St. It was a surprise to everyone present, then, when Shelffo publicly announced a change of heart during public comment at the October 19th city council meeting:

When I first heard about the proposed store on King St, my immediate reaction was 'I don't want it here.'...However, throughout the debates, I have done research of my own...I've found that my position has changed. Fear has turned into panic and we are scrambling to try to come up with an ordinance that will protect us from something we don't need protecting from. That to me is a bad way to make laws. Respectfully, I ask you not to pass the ordinance that focuses on the size and location of adult businesses."<sup>97</sup>

Soon after, in a comment-box debate beginning with Shelffo's polite request that NoPorn include their sources when reprinting statistics, civility deteriorated. After Cohen suggested Shelffo track down the desired sources himself, Shelffo made accusations of

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<sup>96</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2006/10/23/a-response-to-critics-of-the-porn-store-dont-speak-for-everyone.aspx>>

<sup>97</sup> Shelffo, Andrew. City Council Meeting, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

intellectual dishonesty, requesting that citations be used in the future. In a quick and unexpected turn, Adam Cohen used this opportunity to cast shadow over the validity of Shelffo's argument:

Andrew, while I am impressed by your doggedness, I don't really understand your motivations... On July 13 you wrote, "For the record, I don't want the store to open, and I don't think it will... Despite these sentiments, you have been trying for months to confuse the issues, question the validity of mountains of evidence, dispute common sense, oppose modest, well-tested adult-use regulations, belittle citizens who care about their neighborhood, sidetrack a debate about adult businesses into a debate about Wal-Mart, and minimize bad behavior on the part of the porn merchants (e.g. Anthony Nota). Please state for the record whether you are being compensated in any way by Capital Video or its affiliates or agents.

In response, Shelffo attempted to clarify his position:

If you're confused about my position, it might be helpful to keep the words of Emerson in mind: "A foolish consistency is the hob-goblin of little minds." Like most people, when I first heard that Capital Video was opening a store on King St., I was afraid. However, instead of finding evidence to support my fears, I decided to see if my fears had any basis in reality. I realized that my first reaction was wrong.

In the ensuing controversy, Cohen tirelessly cited Shelffo's refusal to deny allegations of "Astroturf," artificial grassroots activism planted by Capital Video. While Shelffo initially refused to dignify this line of questioning with answers, he eventually denied the mounting accusations, both on his blog and in an interview on Bill Dwight's radio show. It was around this time that critical comments truly began to pour into noporn.org, creating intricate conversational threads following nearly every entry.

Over time, NoPorn began to post less of the oppositional feedback posted by viewers on their site. When critical comments did make their way through the screening process, they were usually withheld until a NoPorn rebuttal had been formulated, by which time the post in question had already been shuffled into the black-hole of past

postings. At some point, Adam began to ban commenting access from specific IP addresses, effectively “pre-rejecting”<sup>98</sup> comments from those sources which had previously offended the Cohen-Reiters. When I asked Adam about this, he responded:

Yes, a limited number of people have been banned from commenting... We felt the ratio of personal attacks to debate-enhancing material was unacceptable. If someone participates in attacks on our person anywhere, such as tossing my head at MoPornNorthampton, this puts them in danger of being banned. We alerted Peter Brooks to this risk in March. He declined to disassociate himself from MoPornNorthampton or their tactics, so we are no longer approving his comments. We believe that an environment where people show civility is more likely to produce quality ideas, solutions, and compromises, and more people will want to participate. I also feel a bit foolish making efforts to respect other people and stick to the facts when they do not extend the same courtesies to us.

While Jeff and Jennifer were determined to create an online space in which no comment or submitted article was censored, they were also interested in creating a space in which useful commentary was encouraged above baseless slur.<sup>99</sup> After several personally hurtful and irrelevant comments were posted about the NoPorn contingent, Jeff morphed the MoPorn site into a meritocracy. A “meritocracy” is a form of online distribution of influence, through the employment of a simple voting system. On blogs, and other sites which can eventually contain extremely large masses of information, pertinent information often gets lost in the clutter as it becomes older. A site employing meritocracy, however, keeps those entries which are voted most interesting, applicable, or enjoyable in the most viewable positions. Any reader can afford a unit of appreciation to a particular piece of writing by clicking a button at the end of the text, awarding a

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Jeff Hobbs, 3/29/07.

<sup>99</sup> Jeff and Jennifer do actually admit to removing one particularly terrible “bathroom wall” style anonymous comment directed at Jendi Reiter of NoPorn from their site.

thumbs up of sorts. If enough people show appreciation for something, it remains on the first page, alongside newer material.

On the MoPorn site, visitors can not only post comments without fear of screening or editing; they may post their own “articles” as well, simply by clicking on the “Speak Out” link. In some ways, this system has been wildly successful. Most recently, MoPorn has been host to a slew of NoPorn response papers posted by students assigned by a Florida law professor. Local intellectual, Doug Schubert’s exceedingly smart series, “Taking Stock,” has also come to grace the front pages quite frequently. From journalist ethics to circular logic, Schubert has analyzed and dissected a wide spectrum of issues related to noporn.org. He has also been the first to suggest that if NoPorn is opposed to porn, in part, due to the mistreatment of women in the industry, that they should link to sex-worker’s rights material.<sup>100</sup>

While meritocracy and open-posting posed a useful exercise in free speech and an appropriate way to encourage a wide range of commentary, it confused many readers, Adam, Jendi and myself included. Through a glitch in web-design, it is often virtually impossible to tell which comments are posted by the web administrators (Jennifer and Jeff) and which are anonymously posted by MoPorn visitors. In truth, Jennifer and Jeff write very little of the text on the site. “Most everything Jennifer and I have written is labeled/signed as “Admin” or “mopo”, but you’re right, it is quite hard to tell who wrote what...Actually, I probably should fix that because Adam clearly thinks we write all of the nasty shit people write about him on the site...when in fact, we only write *some* of the nasty shit.”

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<sup>100</sup> Despite repeated suggestions that NoPorn show support to sex workers, they have offered little response beyond paternal disdain and pity for women in the industry.

My first viewing of the site had me both laughing and cringing, amused but also annoyed by the level of personal criticism leveled against NoPorn admins. Upon reexamination, the particularly nasty entries are almost all anonymously posted. This shining jewel of wisdom, for instance, was posted anonymously on MoPorn:

[Directed at NoPorn's Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter] ... You hypocritical fucks!!!! When will you realize that most people don't really care for your antics and that if you truly cared about Northampton you would sell your house now for what you can get and move out of town? Please do the world a favor too and neuter and spay yourselves so that you will not bring up children with your perverse attitude that sex between two consenting adults, whether it be for money or for fun, is wrong. You, Adam and Jendi, are a pox upon Northampton. Please do the local community a favor, sell your house and leave the area."<sup>101</sup>

Personal attacks of this nature offer virtually no merit, nor are they particularly humorous. In a hypocritical turn of his/her own, this writer delivers a blow to Adam and Jendi's right to free speech and expression, while threatening their reproductive rights and forcefully recommending relocation. I can understand how submissions like this one could foster not merely discomfort but fear for personal safety. This has been a concern of Adam and Jendi's for some time, especially as the location of the Cohen-Reiter's home has repeatedly been visited by strangers, NoPorn yard signs stolen and defaced.<sup>102</sup>

In contrast, administrative posts more closely resemble coherent argument laced with sarcasm:

... We are *just saying* -- it's entirely possible to distill an idea, link to the relevant and longer source, and sum it up in under two or three paragraphs. Cite and check your sources, and be skeptical, as the plural of "anecdote" is not "data". Complex topics need not be oversimplified, but respecting your reader means respecting your reader's time. And bottom line: volume does not equal quality. Are we saying we are better writers than NoPorn? Yes. That is what we are saying.

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<sup>101</sup> <<http://www.mopornnorthampton.com/node?page=1>>

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter, 10/19/06.

Or sarcasm laced with coherent argument:

I appreciate NoPorn's efforts to delineate the forms of "erotica that are healthy and support good relationships." I'm kind of at a loss about that sort of thing, always picking out the porn that drives a wedge between my boyfriend and I. We wind up throwing shoes at each other and crying, and the next day we're covered in tapenade and goat cheese and the phone's been off the hook all night long. Thank you NoPornNorthampton for combining moralizing with consumer advocacy. It's what I hope for in a grass roots movement.

The voice employed and facts supplied are considerably less abusive, and while the tone is snide, it is not an attack on anyone's personal life, nor is it a request that anyone be silenced or run out of town. There is, however, one clear exception to this boundary abidance by MoPorn administrators. The latest scuffle between NoPorn and MoPorn contingents occurred when Jeff created a low-tech Internet "game" of sorts, the point of which is to throw a cyber-replica of Adam Cohen's head as high as possible before allowing it to bounce on the sidewalk outside 135 King St. While Jeff Hobbs maintained that he thought Adam Cohen would see the humor in his "stress-relief" creation, the Cohen-Reiters perceived the action as a direct threat against their personal safety.

In an email correspondence with Adam, he summarized for me his personal response to MoPorn's overall approach:

They apparently believe our position is so meritless that mockery is the appropriate primary attitude, coupled with intimidation. I have been concerned that through their "head-tossing" game, demands that we vacate the area, and other comments made on their blog, they are creating an atmosphere where our physical safety comes into question. I am disappointed. I do not believe this supports a quality debate where the goal is to work out mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts. I believe they are also discouraging other citizens from participating in the debate... Underneath all, I sense that Jeff and Jennifer despair of aiming for higher quality human relationships or neighborhoods.

While I understand the intensity of emotion Adam and Jendi must be experiencing at the hands of unbridled attacks, I am also frustrated by their adoption of table-turning victim rhetoric. While I don't make any claims at objectivity, I am willing to state unequivocally that while NoPorn's opposition has certainly laid some low blows, NoPorn admins Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter have been the primary participants in these debates actively discouraging the mere expression of particular viewpoints. Still, Jeff Hobbs has experienced a fair amount of guilty feelings since the MoPorn debut:

Does it bother me at all? Yes. Much? Yes. Is it still worth it? Probably. Adam is a real live monster, a genuinely low-quality person, worth standing up to, and I firmly believe that...there's such thing as Internet Ethics, and I think/hope for the most part we've been pretty ethical about what we've done. Having an anonymous message board where people can post turns out to be a thorny issue, and in general it gives people an excuse to let loose with their basest most awful thoughts. I think it's been a successful experiment in writing, and an utterly failed experiment in journalism.

Is irony ever a legitimate political tool? In this case, while not every visitor has caught on, MoPorn seems to be moving in an ever more useful direction. And while Jennifer and Jeff never meant to become so heavily involved, their contagious humor has drawn many residents into a discourse which was previously fairly one-sided. Their approach may not have been perfect, but the effects continue to evolve. While NoPorn has undeniably been the target of inappropriate condemnation, they have also created a fair amount of cyber-slander. This approach to fighting dirty is perhaps more insidious than their brash and upfront counterparts, Jeff and Jennifer, but Adam Cohen undeniably uses anti-porn discourse and circular reasoning to disguise the same kinds of patronizing judgments.

Godwin's Law is a significant and, by Internet standards, age-old online "folk knowledge" adage created by attorney Mike Godwin in 1990. It states that as any Internet discussion grows longer, "the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one."<sup>103</sup> There is a tradition in many threaded online discussions that once this occurs, the thread (or conversation) is immediately over, and the person responsible for the analogy has "lost" whatever debate is in progress.<sup>104</sup> In this set of debates, NoPorn has equated pornography not only with Nazism<sup>105</sup>, but with sex slavery<sup>106</sup>, murder<sup>107</sup>, segregation<sup>108</sup> and pedophilia<sup>109</sup> as well, thus setting the anti-porn stance apart as *the* humanist approach to pornography. This leaves the rest of us portrayed as either tip-toeing precariously on the edge of evil or basking in the comfort of purposeful ignorance. There seems to be no room for opinion beyond this oversimplified dichotomy. On nopornnorthampton.org, porn actresses are not vilified, but set apart as pitiable victims of videotaped sexual abuse and of rampant STD infection. Nevertheless, suggestions from frequent NoPorn commenter, "Paddy O'Waggle," that Adam and Jendi post links to sex-workers' rights organizations like COYOTE, the Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation and the Sex Worker's Outreach Program were brushed over without comment. If it is the health and well being of women in the industry that concerns NoPorn Northampton, the anti-porn pair's ambitious online efforts could be

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<sup>103</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin's\\_Law#\\_note-WiredMCM](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin's_Law#_note-WiredMCM)>

<sup>104</sup> This rule does not apply when such references are valid applicable, such as in discussions of the Holocaust or other large-scale crimes against humanity.

<sup>105</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2006/10/10/hustling-the-left.aspx>>

<sup>106</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/search.aspx?q=slavery>>

<sup>107</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2007/04/20/testimony-from-northampton-murder-of-real-women-sold-as-sexual-entertainment-explicit.aspx>>

<sup>108</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/2007/03/21/lessons-from-the-stigma-of-segregation-apply-to-the-stigma-of-porn.aspx#comment-297779>>

<sup>109</sup> <<http://nopornnorthampton.org/categories/Child%20Molestation.aspx>>

effectively redirected toward the improvement of labor practices and treatment of porn models. As it stands, the further stigmatization of all pornography, regardless of content, actually helps to silence the women who appear in it.

Despite all Northampton porn-debate participants advocating the merit of civility and democratic debate, there doesn't seem to be a bridge in cyberspace that can ford the gaps in understanding between NoPorn and MoPorn contingents. NoPorn supporters slam Jeff Hobbs as the political equivalent of an angry pubescent boy, while MoPorn fans rally against the "horror that is NoPornNorthampton".<sup>110</sup> Both contingents criticize personal attacks, but also engage in them. To paraphrase the words of University of Toronto Professor Mark Kingwell, all claims to "liberal" thinking rely on our abilities as human beings to seek out mutual ground, despite differences in opinion. This mutual ground lies in "a discursive space that we are willing to share," be it active creation of compromise or merely the ability of all parties involved to both speak *and* listen.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Doug Schubert, "Taking Stock" series. <http://www.mopornnorthampton.com/>

<sup>111</sup> Mark Kingwell, Professor of Philosophy at University of Toronto, "The Virtue of Civility," Shambala Sun.

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1421&Itemid=247>, January, 2005.

## Conclusion:

“Chestnut Street, again?” Ary and I have crossed this particular road at least three times in our search for Capital Video’s Springfield location, Amazing.Net.

Northampton’s local chapter will be opening soon, and I am eager to understand the nature of the space that has shredded this community’s sex-political solidarity for almost a year. Each Springfield block reinvents our perception of the area; we move from deteriorating industrial space to highly commercial strips of bars and restaurants. We pass gracefully-aged brownstones and a small iron-gated park, two strip clubs and AT&T headquarters before parking and tracking our destination on foot. The neighborhood seems to be primarily one of working-class people of color. Wedged between the festively advertised Dreamteam Barbershop and, unbelievably, C.O.G.I.C, the Church of God in Christ, Amazing.Net’s signage is garish, but certainly not sexually explicit. “Video arcade?” Ary looks at me inquisitively. “Viewing booths,” I answer and a lopsided grin finds its way onto his face.

I wonder, as we approach, what to expect beyond the tinted windows. One of the strangest elements of NoPorn Northampton’s anti-porn agenda for me has been the assertion of physical danger to women and female-bodied individuals within and around decidedly masculine commercial adult space. I have personally never had a disrespectful encounter inside an adult store. In fact, I have noticed a significantly lower level of heterosexual flirtation in adult spaces, hormones subdued by a bittersweet cocktail of sexual shame and an unspoken respect for privacy. I realize that Ary, as female-bodied and male-identified, must have a very different set of understandings about such spaces.

Together, we are a 6 foot-tall femme woman and a smaller queer boy, most often “passing” as biologically male, but rarely as over 21. As we enter, two male sales-clerks are chatting behind the counter; a third clerk approaches as we begin to browse. “Excuse me, how old are you?” she asks Ary politely. When he offers to show her his ID, she shakes her head, already walking away. “No that’s okay, I hear it in your voice.” She returns to unpacking new materials, overjoyed at something invisible from where we stand. “This is the best stuff we’ve gotten in awhile!”

The space is not unlike most other adult stores I’ve been in. There are shelving units stocked with videos, organized by genre: amateur, gonzo,<sup>112</sup> gay, bisexual, transsexual, fetish and more. There is a wall of magazines, both mainstream and obscure, and an impressive collection of reprinted pulp novels, available in two-packs. The “novelty” section wraps around two large walls, multi-colored dildos and anal toys next to cyberskin “pocket pussies” and furry pink handcuffs. There is, however, only one harness to be seen, paired with a diminutive red phallus, and very few BDSM-related toys. Queer, kinky, female-bodied individuals are most likely not a significant target consumer-base. Ary and I pause to ponder DIY rubber thong whip construction and exclaim over appealing paperbacks before venturing together toward mutually uncharted territory.

The viewing booth portion of the store is mostly unremarkable. Much like a multi-stall public restroom, feet are visible below some doors; others are clearly unoccupied. There are around fifteen booths total, most of which seem to be available.

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<sup>112</sup> Gonzo is a category of pornography characterized by a no frills filming style which places the viewer directly into the scene through amateur-inspired extreme close-ups, very little dialogue/plot, and an intense emphasis on sexual performance.

Our chosen stall is just big enough for Ary and I to sit comfortably together, a TV-sized screen built into the wall in front of us. A five-dollar bill slips into the vending-slot, activating sixty hardcore channels for our flipping pleasure. Makeshift flyers plaster the walls: “No Shitting or Pissing in Booth” and “Hang Coat on Coat Hook.” Despite these potentially worrisome reminders, the booth seems well maintained. I guess after reading NoPorn’s material on privatized booths, I was expecting “dirtier.” There are no noticeable smells, no incriminating splotches on the walls or floor. A discreet trashcan in the corner neatly contains all evidence of preceding visitors. A third sign, beside the door, delivers a more extensive message:

Attention Booth Customers: Recently our store was cited for various issues pertaining to the booth area and it is our job to correct these issues.

1. Any customer who is asked to find a booth more than twice will be asked to leave.
2. Any patron caught not using trash receptacle will be asked to leave.
3. Any person using booths must spend money.

I wonder to myself whether this citation came about through routine inspection, or whether it was prompted through public complaint.

After a few moments of enthusiastic channel changing and wide-eyed exchanges, the light-quality in the booth shifts slightly. Ary nudges me, nodding toward what had, until this moment, been a dull glass pane in the wall. It is now a transparent square, lending itself to easy two-way exhibitionism. The man in the booth beside us is middle-aged and nondescript. He flips quickly through the channels for a bit, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Then, as suddenly as he has been illuminated, he is gone. I figure he must have turned off his side of the two-way mirror now that he had settled on a channel, ready now to unzip in privacy. But he reappears seconds later, still fully clothed.

“He must’ve run out of money...” Ary guesses out loud. Either way, he soon leaves in search of another booth, or perhaps a more suitable voyeur. We notice a bolted-on steel plate, just about waist height. What was once a functional glory-hole has now been shut down, possibly in response to the recent negative citations mentioned above.

Our next “neighbor” is a man in his late 20’s/early 30’s. He does a quick double take at Ary and I as he sits, taken aback by the platonic scene, two smiling kids sharing a seat and some gay porn. This man unzips and attempts not to look at us, but he too leaves “unsuccessfully” after a few minutes. It is a sad and simple realization, “They are all so disappointed by us!” It is impossible to estimate what these men are looking for from their visit. Are they seeking sexual partners? Someone to watch/be watched by? Just stopping off on a lunch break to watch some porn and blow off some steam? How did these men read Ary and I? Did the presence of female-bodied individuals create guilt or embarrassment for the men sitting beside us? How would these interactions have been different if we had been an actively participating couple in the booth, rather than friends? If either of us had been in the booth alone?

We spend our last few minutes seeking out queer porn channels. The ratio turns out to be about 50 percent heterosexual material, and close to 50 percent gay male porn. Several channels feature individuals that I register as transwomen, though I hesitate to identify them as such.<sup>113</sup> I don’t notice any lesbian sex scenes, not even hetero-formulated girl-on-girl; the presence of penis seems imperative. In our speedy perusal, I witness one depiction of what I would call “rough” sex, the woman deepthroating while

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<sup>113</sup> In the mainstream porn industry, these individuals are often advertised as “Shemales” or “chicks with dicks.” Nowhere on this pornographic packaging have I seen clarifying examples of self-identification.

being yanked around and smacked in the head and one scene involving leather and masks. I wonder whether Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter have ever been in one of these booths, for the sake of thorough research, and how many depictions they would deem “violent” or sexually problematic.

Eventually, the possibility of a first-hand look at mysterious blue gloves draws us into the alley alongside the store. There is a whole lot of broken glass, bags overflowing with barbered hair and old magazines, even a pair of heavy canvas work gloves, but there are no dirty rubber gloves to be seen. “Do people who have sex in alleys really use gloves, anyway?” Ary asks. There is no evidence of public sex of any kind in this area, nor is there anyone loitering, aside from us. Even inside the store, very few customers come and go. I don’t have any opportunity to feel out of place, as there are very few other customers around, and while Ary and I both recognize an overwhelming marketing to masculine and male-bodied desire, we also identify a level of queer potential. I think Ary sums it up quite nicely:

I think female-bodied queer folks are able to do a certain amount of re-signification of the merch[endise] in places like [this], but it takes work on the part of the dyke/lesbian/queergirl/transboy. It's not neatly packaged and certainly not targeted at that demographic's consumption.<sup>114</sup>

I, personally, am excited at finding videos featuring proclaimed feminist porn-stars, some of whom I have met firsthand, and by the volume of queer and fetish material available both in the store and in the booths. And while this space, and most of this material, was certainly not created with either of us in mind, it is a comfortable and safe-feeling space for me. As we exit the booth area, two women are browsing the sales area

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<sup>114</sup> Email correspondence with Ary Cockrell, 4/11/07

together. Ary walks up behind me and whispers excitedly, “We just got cruised by those queer girls!” And when we leave, the female employee actively says goodbye, “Have a good night, ladies!” I cringe at the misreading of Ary’s gender, but he shrugs it off:

...while sometimes I do want to pass in spaces like that, especially if I'm alone, it's also pretty cool to be recognized as queer, even if that means being outed as not "male."

“Queerness,” as I define it, moves beyond binary imaginings of gender and sexual identity, providing an elasticity and inclusivity absent from other oft-employed identifying vocabulary. A queer identity can be an amalgamation of self-identifying characteristics, largely constructed in opposition to heteronormativity, but not necessarily defined as the opposite of heterosexuality. Cathy Cohen, in her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” reformulates the ways in which queer coalition can exist, encouraging solidarity among marginalized groups, not based on one “homogenized identity” but on a position oppositional to dominant sociosexual norms. This vision of queer coalition emphasizes the intersectionality of identity, criticizing uncomplicated understandings of social power that prioritize particular systems of oppression over others. Cohen calls for an analysis of power that recognizes race, class, gender and sexuality as interlocking systems of power, complicating queer identity far beyond sexual partner choice. Through this reformulation, single teen mothers, non-monogamous heterosexual couples, and pansexual self-identified “perverts” can all be inserted into queer identity where “LGBT” leaves off.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Cohen, Cathy. Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics.

Cohen's essay has pushed me to re-envision not only conceptions of queerness itself, but also definitions of queer space. If the potential of space remains latent until activated by those who inhabit and use it, then any "space" holds the potential for perpetual transformation. Public sex spaces and adult entertainment establishments, initially created with heteronormative desire and consumption in mind, are often transformed into "queered" spaces, whether the transformation lasts a moment or a decade. In the words of Jean-Ulrick Desert:

Queer space is, in large part, the function of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified: a seduction of the reading of space where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape.<sup>116</sup>

The rapid customer turnover rate in adult stores and public sex spaces lends itself effortlessly to such transformative moments.

As Ary and I experienced inside Amazing.Net, while adult-use businesses certainly don't go out of their way to cater toward queer or female clientele, neither do they seem to actively work against the inclusion of these communities. Including Ary and I, the female-bodied to male-bodied ratio at the Springfield store was fairly even. In addition, clientele appeared to span both class and racial boundaries. To me, the most heteronormative part of the afternoon was walking past the barbershop on our way back to the car and receiving several up-and-down looks and sexually-charged nods from a group of men inside. In other words, while queer culture cannot exist in the absence of a

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<sup>116</sup> Ingram, Gordon Brent. "Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations," in Queers in Space, Ingram Gordon Brent, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, ed. Seattle: Bay Press, 1997. Pp. 27-52.

dominant normative culture to be posited against (and vice-versa)<sup>117</sup>, possibility remains for the existence of a useful blurring of boundaries between them, a multi-faceted understanding of entitlement and space.

I would never have thought, a few months ago, that I would be advocating a mainstream porn emporium as potential queer space. I'm still not sure that I'd like to. If queerness, in Cohen's application, becomes any formulation of sexuality lying outside the "appropriate" boundaries of heteronormativity and the subsequent power that provides, adult stores' position becomes ambiguous. On one hand, depictions of gendered power and the perpetuation of sexist and heterosexist stereotype in a high percentage of porn could place it in the very heart of conceptions of heteronormativity. Conversely, the viewing of pornography, especially queer, fetish and kink material, is also a highly stigmatized and socially condemned sexual activity. Say what you will about privileged sexuality, porn is still a major source of sexual shame for many men and women; porn viewers (specifically in anti-porn campaigns) are often stereotyped and harassed solely on grounds of sexual behavior.

I do not intend to set up male porn viewers as disempowered or victimized in relation to porn, because men do dominate the industry, profit exponentially greater from women's bodies than the women themselves and are most often the perpetrators in sexualized violence against more vulnerable individuals. I mean only to point out that a porn store carrying both hetero and homosexual pornographic material is likely a sexual safe space for many individuals, a space in which a diversity of desire is perceived as less than shameful, even if the objects of desire are often highly modified in ways we might

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<sup>117</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader

view as at odds with our own conceptions of queerness or sex-positivity. Adult stores, in my experience, are counter publics, safety zones outside of sexual taboo and embarrassment, separate from reproductive focus. Inside an adult store, I relish the fostering of pleasure education, something missing from nearly every other public realm in life. I have stood next to nervous men in adult video sections requesting fetish material. I have dragged countless giggling friends inside shops to buy their first vibrating toys. And as of today, I have spent ten fascinating minutes in a Capital Video porn-viewing booth, conspicuously scribbling notes and reveling in good company.

This project has proved an immeasurably challenging endeavor. While I knew that attempting any ethnographic project in less than a year would be strenuous, I had no idea just how multi-layered and complex this particular pornographic controversy would be. While all participants in this debate had a powerful and unique take on pornography and its place in Northampton, it was those motivations underlying their actions that interested me most. NoPorn Northampton's current motives especially intrigue me, after straddling a wide array of ideological approaches to anti-pornography activism. Regardless of whatever core force drives Adam Cohen and Jendi Reiter to persevere, even after the local battle has been lost, I have come to believe, after nine months, that they take their *humanitarian* efforts in relation to pornography extremely seriously. In fact, despite rhetoric to the contrary, I have understood all of my subjects to be intensely, emotionally honest, even when it meant contradicting, and sometimes altering, their own beliefs.

Foremost in my own struggle has been my personal resistance to falling into dichotomous thinking patterns of my own; it has become clear over the past nine months

that “pornography” is no more a self-explanatory term than “sex” is. Each individual understanding of sexuality, and of fantasy, proves endlessly interpretable and is employed/deployed in very different ways as it travels through the mazes of discourse and action. In the realm of sexual discourse, it is the diverse middle-ground that proves most interesting. To oppose all pornography, delineated from erotica by a self-imposed checklist, is to impose one’s own personal boundaries, sexual preferences and sex-political views on other sexual beings, without respect for individualized needs and positively-experienced pleasures. Regardless of who or what anti-pornography activism seeks to target, this indiscriminate condemnation always negatively affects those individuals who live their sexual lives farthest from the sexual norm. Nevertheless, to applaud all pornography, without concern for sexual violence, industry working conditions, and sexually transmitted infection is to esteem the right to free speech over the value of human life.

As I conclude this project, the debates move on without me. Long-time Northampton residents Lu Stone and Mike Kirby have filed a suit challenging the validity of the Planning Board’s approval of Capital Video’s site plan. As of today, there is still no grand opening in sight. When I asked Adam Cohen recently to characterize NoPorn’s future plans, his response hinted at an anti-Capital energy reserve:

Capital Video, as a large porn producer and porn merchant, is a useful and relevant focus for our critique of porn as a whole, and we will monitor their Northampton operation closely for signs of harm to our neighborhood.<sup>118</sup>

The drama is far from finished, and I am looking forward to participating in coming conversations, not as a Hampshire student or as an ethnographer, but as another resident

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<sup>118</sup> Email correspondence with Adam Cohen, 4/03/07

of downtown Northampton. When those frosted doors finally do swing open, I will be on the scene, sans hand-held recorder and ballpoint pen.