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WGST 485

Pornography, the LGBTQ+ Community, and the Queer Alternative

Pornography is a complicated and controversial topic. Much has been said about how porn may or may not affect individuals, but very little has been done in the academic community on how pornography affects the LGBTQ+ community. In debates of censorship and regulation of porn, their voices are often ignored in public debate in favor of straight, feminist, or puritanical, religious discourses. This is problematic because pornography, particularly queer pornography, has done much for the evolution and self-affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community. It would be remiss if such positive effects of such a controversial exploit were to go unacknowledged. In conjunction with my academic readings, I interviewed a contact in the queer porn and Burlesque world named Max Shaw to better understand the finer points of queer porn production and the effects it has on its participators and viewers. Interestingly, the interview often lined up with themes that occurred in some of the more current literature referencing queer porn while giving a specific emphasis on the current issue of censorship of LGBTQ+ sexuality in the public and private spheres as well as an intersectional analysis of the queer porn industry. I will break down my research into three sections beginning with issues of mainstream porn for LGBTQ+ individuals. Then, I will shift to queer porn and discuss how it differs from mainstream porn and how those differences make it a better alternative to the current mainstream LGBTQ+ porn categories. Finally, I will discuss the issues of censorship that have arisen, as well as the merits

of porn literacy programs and how they might help dispel some of the main concerns people have over adolescents' access to pornography.

Before I begin discussing the merits and pitfalls of mainstream porn, I would like to introduce my interviewee Max in his own words through a statement he provided me at the beginning of my research process. I believe this statement establishes Max's authority on the subject of queer porn and sex work. Max's statement details the work he and his fiancé Nicole have done and the work they hope to do in the future as well as hinting at the reasoning behind their work in this field:

My name is Max Shaw and along with my partner Nicole shoot, edit and distribute queer porn! We are just getting started but have built a home studio and are ready for clients as soon as it is safe to have others in our home. I have a background as a professional burlesque photographer and have had portraits published internationally. I've been fortunate enough to photograph many icons in Burlesque - including Miss Exotic World 2011, Miss Indigo Blue and Miss Exotic World 2018, INGA. Burlesque is an art form full of queerness and through it I met my partner and fiancé, Nicole aka Zsa Zsa Bordeaux. She has been teasing audiences since 2013, and is a proud choreographer and member of Hub City Shimmy. She is a cam worker, runs her own Onlyfans, and plans to use her privilege to financially dominate men into giving money to fund our queer porn studio mission. She is unapologetically perverted, hairy, and political and loves to play with people's expectations of femininity. We began making our own content, frankly, as a way to explore our sexuality and heal some old wounds that kept impacting our life. I identify as a trans man, though I have not yet had surgery nor am I currently on hormones. Zsa is cisgender Indigenous woman. I've never seen someone who looks like me in mainstream porn, and that's helped me internalize a lot of society's ideas about trans folks and sexuality. Many trans folks are sexual and desirable and diverse and I think if mainstream porn highlighted that instead of fetishizing us, society would be a lot safer for us. Our goal is to create a safe, consensual porn studio who produces quality artistic films and represents all bodies and abilities and gender expressions.

Mainstream Pornography and the LGBTQ Community

Mainstream pornography, which is the most accessible and popular kind of pornography through sites such as Pornhub and YouPorn, has its virtues but is overwhelmingly stereotypical and grounded in fetishizing identities of LGBTQ+ individuals. Most of the current literature discussing mainstream pornography focuses on gay men and lesbians. Transgender mainstream pornography is also a major category though far less has been done in the academic community to analyze it. I will discuss my findings about each of these groups in this order. According to Max Shaw, “mainstream porn typically has a lot of money behind it, production value, studio space.”¹ However, because it has so much money behind it, it tends to ostracize some groups while embracing others that have more money-making potential. For example, mainstream gay porn is “typically very masculine, able-bodied, cisgender, men.”² This leaves out anyone who does not fit those strict guidelines that praise masculine stereotypes and physicality. Researchers have highlighted this attraction to “hegemonic masculinity” and how it plays into ideas of heteronormativity as “through the Internet, they can view and, perhaps, imagine themselves as ‘straight’ men who can have sex with other ‘straight’ men.”³ In other words, there is a prizing of the stereotypical strength associated with men while anything deemed feminine or “sissy” becomes undesirable. In mainstream gay porn, there also seems to be aspects that model heterosexual relationships both in the sexual and public sphere as “the business of gay pornography capitalizes on heteronormative representations of sexual partnering.”⁴ An example of this is following the top/bottom sex roles that have been established in the gay community as a

¹ Max Shaw (queer porn producer) in discussion with author, March 9, 2021: pg. 1 of transcript.

² Max Shaw, pg. 9 of transcript.

³ Jay Poole and Ryan Milligan, “Nettosexuality: The Impact of Internet Pornography on Gay Male Sexual Expression and Identity,” *Sexuality & Culture* 22, no. 4 (December 2018): 1196.

⁴ Poole and Milligan, 1198.

staple sexual label. Sometimes gay men are able to utilize the internet to expose themselves to other sexual experiences in order to satisfy fantasies. However, they often police themselves to the point where they would never do those fantasies in real life.⁵ The Internet gives gay men a sort of freedom, but they still allow dominant social expectations to dictate their sexual lives. There is this “clandestine aspect of being able to be sexual in ways that are not acceptable publicly in most places. [Gay men who view these queer performances] don’t claim particular identities, e.g., sadomasochist; yet, they engage in viewing sexual activities that are associated with such identities. There is a certain freedom here that does not seem to exist beyond the Internet.”⁶ This phenomenon has been labelled by academics as “nettersexualities” and can be defined by the Internet’s ability to create “possibilities for plural and fluid sexual identities between and beyond what has been and continues to be constructed as sexual identities.”⁷

There has not been much research done on how mainstream gay porn affects gay men’s sexual health practices. However, one study done published in 2015 sought to show what the most important factors are for gay men choosing what SEM (sexually explicit media) to consume. Overall, the main factor in choosing SEM is cost.⁸ Free pornography is the most desirable for consumption. Mainstream porn is often the most accessible and free option, hence there is a current movement to make alternative forms of porn more accessible. However, the study also found that “thirty-five percent of our main survey’s sample had no preference for or against condom use in SEM and only 25% ranked condom use among their top three most important characteristics of SEM.”⁹ This is surprising given the impact of AIDS/ HIV on the gay

⁵ Poole and Milligan, "Nettersexuality," 1197-8.

⁶ Poole and Milligan, 1198.

⁷ Poole and Milligan, 1200.

⁸ Dylan L. Galos et al., "Preferred Aspects of Sexually Explicit Media among Men Who Have Sex with Men: Where Do Condoms Fit In?," *Psychology & Sexuality* 6, no. 2 (June 2015): 151.

⁹ Galos et al, "Preferred Aspects," 153.

community. The rise of bareback porn in the queer porn community seems to correlate with this finding. Paul Morris is a gay bareback porn creator who has reversed this idea about safe sex and stigma of HIV by making films with HIV-positive performers who do not use condoms. Morris wants to change this idea that gay men with HIV/AIDS are “damaged.”¹⁰ It is a controversial stance to take. However, much of Morris’ beliefs line up with queer sexual theory and queer porn themes. Having been rejected by the strict sexual moralism of America, he turned to queer porn to escape those rigid judgements.

There have been debates for decades about the potential harmfulness of pornography. Anti-pornography feminists believe that porn degrades women. However, the existence of gay male porn refutes such a claim. Catherine Salmon and Amy Diamond studied both heterosexual and homosexual male porn and found that there are more similarities than one would think. After all, “if pornography is all about putting women in their place, we would expect gay male pornography either not to exist at all or, if it did exist, to differ in significant ways from straight male porn.”¹¹ There is no difference in the amount of male-initiated versus female-initiated encounters and coercive behaviors is rare for both categories. In terms of oral sex, there aren’t any major differences and even though “the absence of women means no cunnilingus in the homosexual films; however, there was a substantial amount in the heterosexual ones, a mean of 6.5 acts per film (compared to 7.0 acts of fellatio, a nonsignificant difference between male and female receptive oral sex).”¹² Due to feminist claims about the influence of porn on violence against women, one would think there would be more violent acts portrayed in mainstream

¹⁰ Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen, “Risk and Utopia: A Dialogue on Pornography,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 2014): 217.

¹¹ Catherine Salmon and Amy Diamond, “Evolutionary Perspectives on the Content Analysis of Heterosexual and Homosexual Pornography,” *Journal of Social, Evolutionary & Cultural Psychology* 6, no. 2 (May 2012): 195.

¹² Salmon and Diamond, “Evolutionary Perspectives,” 196.

heterosexual pornography. This is not the case. There were barely any significant violent acts performed in either category. Of course, this does not mean that mainstream porn is not problematic in other ways like perpetrating harmful stereotypes and unrealistic sexual encounters. This merely means that claims of anti-pornography feminists about the degradation of women in pornography may be exaggerated.

Lesbian pornography is another major mainstream LGBTQ+ category. It functions as the precursor to queer pornography as “it was the first form of pornography that responded to feminist critiques of sex and gender norms and attempted to make pornography more ethical for female performers and spectators.”¹³ In order for lesbians to be accepted into the feminist fold, their culture and sexuality were essentially erased in order for them to successfully assimilate. Pro-sex lesbian feminists, as a result of the Sex Wars, sought to “re-eroticize” the lesbian community through lesbian-produced porn.¹⁴ The butch/femme dynamic within lesbian pornography inherently “illustrates a collective reworking of the dominant hetero-cultural tropes of desire” but also shows how those tropes operate within the pornographic and social scenes.¹⁵ A femme will generally pass as straight unless she is seen as coupled with a butch, for “the femme of the coupled butch-femme subject is unable to visually register in the hetero(homo) sexual economy, wherein she would be inscribed as straight (making an appearance as a passing lesbian). If the femme were to enter the frame of representation alone, without a visibly butch escort, she would remain invisible and her (homo)sexuality would remain unseen or unrepresented.”¹⁶ The fact that a femme still needs a butch in order to refute one’s straightness

¹³ Shawna Lipton, “Trouble Ahead: Pleasure, Possibility and the Future of Queer Porn,” *New Cinemas* 10, no. 2–3 (2012): 198.

¹⁴ Terralee Bensinger, “Lesbian Pornography: The Re/Making of (a) Community,” *Discourse* 15, no. 1 (1992): 72-3.

¹⁵ Bensinger, “Lesbian Pornography,” 81.

¹⁶ Bensinger, 78.

proves that there are still heteronormative aspects associated with society's understandings of lesbian sexuality.

Lesbian-produced pornography is still dominated by the “white, young, thin, fem women” which undoubtedly ignores the many who do not fit this ideal.¹⁷ Even though lesbian-produced pornography breaks barriers and confronts difference in sexuality, it still seems to be grasping for acceptance from or assimilation with the white, cisgender, male gaze. Yet, it has also had the ability to represent different sexual modes of life which furthers the claim of lesbian pornography being the predecessor of queer porn. Specifically, the publication *OOB (On Our Backs)* mixed soft-core and hard-core to create a more diverse and complete understanding of lesbian sexuality rather than separating the two categories. Sociologist Dana Collins studied *OOB*'s pornographic images and found that “if I combine the categories, ‘Alternative Sexual Practices’, ‘Penetration/Oral Sex/ Tribadism/ Kissing Breasts’, [and] ‘Bondage/Discipline and Sadomasochism’ ...then the combined percentage is 60% which is the same percentage reported for the ‘Touch/Embrace/Kiss’ category.”¹⁸ This indicates that there is a significant market for those sexual practices in the lesbian community. Ironically, “dominance and submission run deep in American feminist narratives of liberation” due to the relationship between the aging feminist and the yet to be liberated young woman, thus lesbian pro-sex feminists have indulged in BDSM even though it is not in “compliance with feminist sexual morality.”¹⁹ Lesbian-produced mainstream pornography definitely defies gender understandings so prevalent in heterosexual

¹⁷ Dana Collins, “Lesbian Pornographic Production: Creating Social/Cultural Space for Subverting Representations of Sexuality,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998): 45.

¹⁸ Collins, “Lesbian Pornographic Production,” 46.

¹⁹ Jeanne Cortiel, “Impure Bodies: American Pornography and Lesbian Corporeality,” *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 30, no. 1/2 (2005): 117, 119.

porn and opens the way for queer porn to generate acceptance for the groups left out of that mainstream ideal.

There has been little academic discussion on mainstream trans pornography, yet it is becoming an ever more popular pornography category. Porn “studios are now looking toward trans pornography and other pornographic niches such as bisexual porn, to maintain profit margins. The rise in popularity of trans and bisexual porn is beginning to destabilize the industry’s presumed straight/gay divide, further complicating ongoing tensions about testing protocols, HIV risk, and crossover performers.”²⁰ Trans pornography has “historically been and still is the first encounter they have with trans people, let alone naked trans bodies.”²¹ While learning about a group of people from porn may be seriously problematic, it is also important that trans bodies and trans voices are being seen and heard in the industry. Trans men are far less visible in the industry than trans women. This is “because a significant demographic of porn producers and consumers are straight men with an interest in the feminine form. Nonetheless, porn with trans men is on the rise too, mainly owing to a growing demand from women and gay men.”²² Transmasculine porn finds its home in the queer porn industry as mostly independent, small studios produce it and are owned by queer people. The fact that transmasculine porn is more evident in the queer porn community versus the mainstream porn community where transfeminine porn dominates shows that mainstream porn is largely controlled by men who prefer the “feminine form.” After all, “almost all mainstream trans porn companies market their products as a straight specialty for men...[and] studies conducted with clients of trans female sex

²⁰ Sophie Pezzutto and Lynn Comella, “Trans Pornography: Mapping an Emerging Field,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 153.

²¹ Pezzutto and Comella, “Trans Pornography,” 155.

²² Pezzutto and Comella, 158.

workers suggest that men enjoyed the transgressive aspects of the encounter and the ability to do things that were considered otherwise taboo for straight men.”²³ For trans men, this invisibility in mainstream porn is damaging as it devalues their sexuality and experience while valuing the experience straight, cisgender men have with viewing transfeminine porn. Max Shaw addressed this need to show “trans men of all types, trans people of all types, [as] the element of control and autonomy is really important for queer people to have because we don’t get it in so many areas of our life. So, if we can get it in our most intimate areas, if we can help people feel that, I would imagine it would be healing. It has been for me.”²⁴ In terms of race in mainstream trans porn, “trans porn is overwhelmingly white, while trans women of color are overrepresented in street-based sex work. Porn featuring Black trans performers is often relegated to the sidelines and sold on separate websites, such as Grooby’s Black Tgirls. Many performers opt to erase their Latinx or other ethnic backgrounds by choosing white-sounding stage names.”²⁵ Queer porn, however, seeks to create a more diverse and intersectional sexual experiences that mainstream porn seems to avoid in favor of hegemonic influences.

Mainstream porn has its virtues such as introducing new forms of sex to individuals but it can also be highly stereotypical and grounded in fetishizing outlier communities. There is a glorification of trauma that occurs in mainstream porn that can further damage the already possibly fragile psyches of abuse survivors. Max Shaw cited these concerns,

I’ve enjoyed mainstream porn for sure and I learned a lot. But I think, I’m thinking specifically of trans women who are so fetishized, black men who are so fetishized in porn and the then the brutality that goes along with that is very damaging and I don’t think it’s something that’s initially damaging but something that like spreads into our culture, into ourselves over time...but I think

²³ Pezzutto and Comella, “Trans Pornography,” 160.

²⁴ Max Shaw, (queer porn producer) in discussion with author, March 9, 2021: pg. 6 of transcript.

²⁵ Pezzutto and Comella, “Trans Pornography,” 164.

for most of us who are passively consuming mainstream porn, it is more harmful than good. I think there's a lot of underage stuff, there's a lot of sibling stuff on the mainstream sites and I think that's really damaging to people like incest survivors, young people. It's odd to me that we go out of our way to block 'sex trafficking' through sites like Craigslist Personals, and Backdoor but you go on to PornHub and it's "Teen Destroyed by..." you know...²⁶

Because of these issues cited by Max, one often has to filter through quite a bit of content on mainstream sites to find something that is realistic and appeals to them. "The main sites are where we're getting queer porn for free and I don't know if that's always a good thing unless you have the time to really sit and filter through and really search and be specific and have the ability to filter through all those really damaging messages while you are searching for pleasure."²⁷ If one has to filter through constant toxic messages, it possibly ruins the potential benefits one can get from good pornography. Mainstream pornography perpetuates how we should or should not act or feel during sex in potentially damaging and repressing ways. For example, "I think when I was consuming mostly mainstream porn, I kind of set myself up to be this like boyfriend character, the pursuer, the top, like very masculine in relation to the femininity...I think mainstream porn had me thinking that that was like a finite thing. Like 'I am this and this is how I relate to people during sex'."²⁸ Queer porn resolves many of these issues cited in the literature and by Max.

²⁶ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 9 of transcript.

²⁷ Shaw, pg. 10 of transcript.

²⁸ Shaw, pg. 12 of transcript.

The Queer Alternative

Queer porn by its very nature is ambiguous. Therefore, it is rather hard to find a solid, complete definition. It can encompass so many feelings, identities, and experiences all social, romantic, and sexual in nature. It can even be outrightly political and rooted in activism. Gender binaries do not rule queer porn; it is far more fluid and expansive. It emphasizes the importance of consensual queer pleasure above all and creating safe spaces for alternative modes of sex. Max Shaw believes that “anything that’s not within the boundary of cis/het normativity would be queer...the other part of it is, like, not for the male gaze...I struggle with some of the porn on some of the mainstream sites like lesbian porn...it doesn’t look like anything any of us have ever done.” Realness and accuracy about various identities’ sexual experiences is a must for creators of queer porn since that realness is so lacking in the mainstream conglomerate. The mainstream porn industry distorts LGBTQ sex as Max notes, “This morning I looked on one of the sites just for queer just to see what’s out there and it was all really aggressive language like ‘So and so plows this person.’ That’s not my experience with queer sex. Most of the time it’s much more tender and intimate than what’s out there. And I think that includes different bodies, different body-shapes, different colors...”²⁹ Many define queer porn “by the queer identity of the performers and producers creating and not based on the sexual acts featured.”³⁰ If the person who is doing the sex act is queer, then the sex act is queer. Nicole, Max’s partner is an example of this as before she and Max started dating, she “publicly identified as straight even though privately she identified as queer and so her sex before was still queer sex, but it wasn’t framed in a way that most people would agree with. The way she had sex was still very queer even though her

²⁹ Shaw, pg. 1 of transcript.

³⁰ Natalie Ingraham, “Queering Pornography through Qualitative Methods,” *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* 7, no. 2 (2013): 218.

partner wasn't."³¹ Queer porn provides those who are left on the fringes of sexual society by mainstream porn with an alternative that better illustrates the queer experience.

Queer porn producers like Courtney Trouble are creating a queer pornographic canon that is including these identities on the fringes that have been previously ignored or distorted in favor of the hegemonic and economic male gaze. Trouble, like many involved in the queer porn industry, had personal motivations for entering the industry specifically "to document her private sexual fantasies and put them in the public eye, at the same time provoking general audiences to question their preconceptions about sexuality, gender and power."³² Trouble creates revisionist history films that take popular mainstream porn films and remake them with queer bodies to show that pleasure is not only the privilege of the "suffocating hegemony of the 'normal'."³³ In her films, Trouble also prizes the "female cum shot" and how it has become "a new standard in the repertoire of queer porn" because it the visibility of the female orgasm creates the "political import" that men receive through their representations of sex.³⁴ Queer porn producers are embracing these sexual aspects usually ignored and placing them on an empowering pedestal. Autonomy and control over the production of one's identity is of the utmost importance in queer porn and for valid reasons, as it ensures the validity and accuracy of the sexual performance of that identity while keeping queer money in queer hands and out of the snare of the mainstream porn conglomerate. For example, Max and his partner have

"taken this kind of like camera crew or production company out of it that may have their own interests or their own idea of what queer sex is and just given it to ourselves. And I think that's part of like, the rise of queer porn in terms of OnlyFans is that people are

³¹ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 1 of transcript.

³² Lipton, "Trouble Ahead," 200.

³³ Lipton, 200-202; Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen, "Risk and Utopia: A Dialogue on Pornography," *GLQ* 20, no. 3 (2014): 229.

³⁴ Lipton, "Trouble Ahead," 203.

getting that autonomy for the first time. So, we're able to say these are the bodies we want to represent, this is how we want to represent them, these are the things we're going to include and the literal lens which we're going to film our porn through.³⁵

The site CrashPadSeries.com differs from mainstream sites in that “each character’s page features a bio which typically includes information on the model’s background, gender identity, and preferred pronouns... [and allows] the individual space for self-definition and providing the viewer the information necessary to recognize and respect the model’s gender identity.”³⁶ You are able to see discussions take place before and after the performance takes place. These sexual negotiations are an important aspect to queer porn and queer sex in general. It is important to emphasize that “having that authenticity and connection and intimacy and showing that negotiating the boundaries is sexy. Safe words are sexy. Being respected and talking during sex is sexy. Kind of shed all the narratives that say you have to fast-forward through all that stuff and just get to the fucking.”³⁷ This authenticity in queer porn has the ability to transform our sexual experiences. One can be freer to experiment and discuss what one does and does not like. Damaging porn tropes could be retired in favor of more accepting and diverse acts. Max highlights this importance of sexual negotiations in queer porn and how mainstream porn differs from this:

I think normalizing the conversation part of sex is really important. I think queer sex typically tends to have more of that negotiation because there’s more ways to have sex. Especially with a lot of cis men, they’re very much alike. Like “this is what we do and how we do it.” I think queer folks tend to understand the need for safety and the need for communication and the need for the different ways to reach pleasure at least in my experience. There’s also the

³⁵Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 2 of transcript.

³⁶Cherie Steise. “Fucking Utopia: Queer Porn and Queer Liberation.” *Sprinkle: A Journal of Sexual Diversity Studies* 3, (April 2010): 22-3.

³⁷Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 13 of transcript.

safe sex part of it. “Have you been tested recently?” Taking out the stigma of that is really important. There’s still so much stigma. Talking about STIs and normalizing it. Talking about cleaning your toys. You know, just all these things that go into sex but you don’t see in porn. Then you watch mainstream porn and you start having sex and you’re like “Oh, there’s all these other things I guess aren’t sexy to do.” Like ask to be kissed or ask to touch there or all sorts of things. Really just modelling that is invaluable because there’s not a lot. Outside of CrashPad, I don’t think I’ve really seen it. There are some women-led porn studios that tend to be mostly straight that they show a little bit of the negotiation and kind of give the illusion that the woman is in power. But again, who’s behind the camera? Who’s directing this scene? Who’s profiting on it? Is it queer people? Is it women? Or is it another cis guy in an office? So, tying back to the idea that we’re keeping the commerce among ourselves and the power amongst ourselves and I think that’s a big part of safety. We’re not just handing over the footage to someone to edit how they want. We’re going to make sure all the way through that it’s what the people want, that it’s what we want.

However, it must be noted that not everyone has the ability economic or otherwise to take control over productions of their identities. This goes into intersectional issues of race and class as some groups of people are more economically and socially privileged than others making their ability to produce their own identities easier than others. Max and his partner Nicole hope to “provide a low-cost or free porn studio for people of color so they can express and have this content for themselves.”³⁸ Who is included in the industry and conversations around the industry and who is not must be acknowledged and remedied.

Acceptance and affirmation of oneself is helped along by queer porn in ways that mainstream does not. It helps people with “coming to terms with and understanding their bodies,

³⁸ Shaw, pg. 2 of transcript.

their responses and their sexual pleasures.”³⁹ It allows people to realize their own desirability and their own sexual desires that have been denied to them by mainstream porn. Max has struggled with the mainstream definitions of how he is supposed to have sex and how he is supposed to look, but with the help of queer porn and his partner Nicole, “I started to really let myself seek pleasure the way I actually wanted, not the way I felt like I was supposed to. I think a lot of queer people have that same kind of feeling of not feeling free in their sexuality... You see it in mainstream porn. It’s a lot of ‘lesbian stud fucks pretty femme.’ That’s not typically the experience. There’s so much more to us than that, but it’s all we’re given.”⁴⁰ Queer porn has the ability to aid the healing process in its participators and its viewers. For Max and Nicole, participating in queer porn and taking that time for themselves improved their self-esteem and helped heal traumas related to previous relationships. “Both of us have had a lot of abusive relationships, sexual, platonic, family, all of it. Choosing pleasure and choosing joy and choosing to set aside time every day to actually play and connect was always really important to us because it just kind of drowns out everything.” Helping others find this path to healing is part of Max and Nicole’s goals for their work. It is about helping others find themselves and see themselves represented in porn because Max and Nicole and others in the academic literature know what it is like to not see themselves represented. It invalidates someone’s sexual identity when they are unable to find people that look like them and have sex like them. In this sense, queer porn has the ability to possibly save lives by affirming the sexual desires of those who fall on the fringes of sexual acceptability in our society.

It’s healing for us personally and then to get to share it is another layer of healing and community and then when we’re able to bring

³⁹ Clarissa Smith, Fiona Atwood, and Martin Barker. “Queering Porn Audiences.” In *Queer Sex Work*. Routledge Studies in Crime and Society 14. London; New York: Routledge, 2015: 181.

⁴⁰ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 6-7 of transcript.

in other people, it will be even more of a layer of community and healing and safety. It's been a hell of a few years politically for us. I think it's important to play and, you know, if we can reach people and have people say "Well, this helped me come to terms with myself or ask for what I need more," that's the goal. Five years from now if we can have people who themselves a little harder because they've gotten to see themselves through a safe lens, then that would be the dream. That's our end goal. It's not about making money. It's about changing queer people's lives.⁴¹

However, there are barriers to queer porn like accessibility. You often have to pay for queer porn whereas mainstream porn is free, but this is due to a lack of sponsors for queer porn. Mainstream porn has far more money behind it, thus it is able to provide free content. If more support was thrown behind queer porn, then it would be more of a competitor in the industry. Censorship is another issue that is holding queer porn back. In order to obtain sponsors, one may have to assimilate into heteronormative society more rather than being true to their beliefs. It is a double bind because queer people are able to get money and participate in capitalism, but one may have to sacrifice some of the queerness in them publicly in order to maintain this sponsorship. On this topic of sponsorship and assimilation, Max said,

My tendency is to be like "Ugh, they assimilated and it looks so heteronormative" and then this little voice in my head is also like "but they're getting their money." I just wish the same opportunities were available for people who maybe didn't look like them or black and brown bodies, disabled bodies, all bodies, more tattoos, not just the neatly packaged easy to digest lesbian and gay man that our parents are comfortable seeing. But "trans people can't exist." It all kind of intersects in the porn world in the sex work world and I think that's why sex work has always been such an institution. It is kind of this microcosm for everything else going on in the world and they get hit the hardest.⁴²

⁴¹ Shaw, pg. 8 of transcript.

⁴² Shaw, pg. 15 of transcript.

There is a stigma surrounding sex work where it is viewed as not real work, thus its queer political potential is sometimes ignored. Anti-pornography groups choose to label all pornography as detrimental to women. However, “the anti-porn ‘ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers’.”⁴³ The cons of mainstream pornography have the ability to be resolved through investment in the queer porn industry, as many of those problematic concepts in mainstream porn are absent in the queer porn genre. The queer porn industry will often emphasize their performer’s agency as “the female pornographic performer is never granted the agency of ‘worker’; she must instead remain ‘victim’.”⁴⁴ Max talks about this stigma and how sex work is not viewed as real work because “anything that’s not working for someone else directly, our society is like ‘but that’s not real work.’” Yet, everyone who has a job sells themselves. You sell your labor; it is only the content of that labor that changes. This stigma prevents sex workers from being fully transparent about their sex work activities to loved ones and sometimes employers. It is kind of ironic that there is this stigma around sex work considering how prolific it is in our modern society. Max highlights this irony:

We’re on the fringes of society in that we’re queer but also because we do sex work and I would imagine even more if we were brown and visibly disabled. Yeah, it’s kind of the forgotten, most vulnerable population that we take for granted and everybody uses and everybody enjoys. Everybody uses porn in some way and Instagram and Facebook which are our ways to connect are being taken from us. I think it would be a really big disservice to sex work and the history of sex workers to not be political with it. We have all these tools, all these resources right now to unionize and come together and really make a change. We’re hoping to be just a little part of that movement and talk about it. People have no idea about these things. You hear that OnlyFans is a quick way to make

⁴³Helen Hester. “After the Image: Labour in Pornography.” In *Queer Sex Work*. Routledge Studies in Crime and Society 14. London; New York: Routledge, 2015: 32.

⁴⁴Hester, “After the Image,” 35.

money and so you jump on that. You've got to honor the legacy of the work of people who came before you and the risk. It's not just a fun thing to do because you're bored at home. There's still a tremendous risk on it. I'm out to my family about everything but the fact that we do porn.⁴⁵

In order to stall the progress queer sex workers are trying to make in society, laws and social media barriers have been put in place to hide LGBTQ sexuality from the public.

Censorship and Porn Literacy

There is an active campaign to censor LGBTQ+ sexuality and LGBTQ+ sex workers. Tumblr is a social media entity that up until 2018 was a sanctuary and community for queer porn, queer bodies, and queer desires. Censorship of LGBTQ+ sexuality changed that. Now, adult content is banned for those under eighteen and now a safe search mode is in place on the platform that makes it harder for even adults to access queer content. Tumblr's queer content created a close-knit community and safe space for LGBTQ+ discussions to take place. Tumblr was also a place for political discussions within that adult content as one user noted, 'most of the images I look at are for a blog I write about feminism and femdom porn.' Authenticity and diverse identities and bodies made this Tumblr community more welcoming than mainstream porn. More specifically,

Curation is the element that brings to life Tumblr as a platform. It is a way in which the archive is shaped affectively and in which a taste community is formed. Feminist, queer and BDSM desires are circulated through reblogs of stills and gifs by an online counterpublic that has found on the platform easiness and freedom of access. The diverse, reliable, quality, eclectic content and the platform's structure and interface allow a great capacity for both activity and passivity in this networked community invested in

⁴⁵ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 3-4 of transcript.

feminist and queer politics of representation where the circulation of affect takes centre stage in its formation.⁴⁶

Tumblr has been described as a “queer utopia” and a “queer vortex.” The queer utopia of Tumblr is defined as “a space where queer potential flourishes, where new expansive ways to think about the future materialize.”⁴⁷ Talking about queer desires, queer sex, and the queer experience in general allows for this queer potential to expand. The discourse on Tumblr was respectful and everyone is willing to learn about others in the community. If you are not “out,” Tumblr did not require a real name to create an account and comments on posts were harder to find in order to discourage homophobic or transphobic comments. Tumblr had the potential to replace other more concrete queer spaces like the gay bar as “social networking sites have also emerged as vehicles for queer youth to practice intimate storytelling, as they digitally narrate their identities and lives for likeminded audiences.”⁴⁸ The queer vortex of Tumblr is the “experience of being sucked into an online black hole with severe limitations.”⁴⁹ There are some limitations because of this vortex such as “the temporary nature of social engagement that Tumblr affords, the potential information bubble that it creates, the dark underbelly of its communities, and the increasing corporatization of the site.”⁵⁰ This increasing corporatization came into play in 2018 when the adult content ban went into place. Pressures from other companies Tumblr was involved in plus contemporary issues like the MeToo movement and harassment in the workplace played a role in the ban as there have been successful lawsuits regarding porn in the

⁴⁶ Alessandra Mondin, “‘Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images:’ Blogging, Reblogging and Scrolling Feminist, Queer and BDSM Desires,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (June 2017): 290.

⁴⁷ Andre Cavalcante, “Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (2019): 1716.

⁴⁸ Cavalcante, “Tumbling Into Queer Utopias,” 1719.

⁴⁹ Cavalcante, 1716.

⁵⁰ Cavalcante, 1728.

workplace.⁵¹ Advertising is another factor because sexual content deters advertisers, thus a ban was instituted in favor of a more conservative capitalism. In theory, the safe mode that was instituted after the ban should still show LGBTQ+ non-sexual content. However, users reported that this was not the case. If one was to type in “gay,” “queer,” or “trans,” nothing would appear.⁵² This shows that it goes beyond just the issue of porn and into issues of erasure and censorship. One trans user who shared his journey with phalloplasty mentioned how important it was for him to be able to see others’ experiences with phalloplasty.⁵³ Tumblr made this possible, but under the new ban, phalloplasty content could be censored. This keeps others from finding valuable information some of which may save lives. As a result of the ban, Tumblr lost about forty percent of its users in a yearlong period. In 2017, Tumblr was purchased by Verizon in a four-billion-dollar acquisition of Yahoo’s businesses. In 2019, after the ban had been in effect for a year, Tumblr sold for a mere three million dollars.⁵⁴

Max and Nicole were both on Tumblr prior to the ban. They stopped using the platform after the ban when into place. Max discussed the Tumblr ban debate:

That was such a good archive of content that doesn’t normally get seen. It was a safe place to post NSFW photos, it was a safe place to tease out videos and gifs. I think it probably got banned because kids, people under eighteen technically, were probably finding a lot of queer porn and porn on there to begin with. I know I did as a teenager, fan-fic was the thing, it was how I learned a lot about myself and my sexuality. I think that censoring it there just drove people to more of the mainstream sites and then it’s just another way to filter the content to make sure that everybody is seeing these things that come through this lens from the mainstream porn conglomerate. So, I think that’s really damaging. I think it just pushes the narrative on Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr. It just makes

⁵¹ Carolyn Bronstein, “Pornography, Trans Visibility, and the Demise of Tumblr,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 243-4.

⁵² Cavalcante, “Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes,” 1731-2.

⁵³ Bronstein, “Pornography, Trans Visibility, and the Demise of Tumblr,” 244.

⁵⁴ Bronstein, 249.

it easier for them to say we don't exist and that has real repercussions in the real world because you're like "Oh I've never met a sex worker or I don't know a trans person" and it's like "Well, you do." It gave people a private life to live instead of just the public one which for a lot of us as queer people, that's all we have. I came out online before I came out in person as everything, as lesbian, trans, queer, sex worker. So, I think that taking that away is really damaging for us.⁵⁵

Max pointed out that it is a combination of factors, social, political, economic in nature that advocate for this censorship of LGBTQ+ sexuality. Economically speaking, it benefits the mainstream companies to ban queer porn as then the only alternative is their problematic content. It is a strategy to keep money out of queer hands and to further push sex workers to the fringes of society. Federal laws such as SESTA-FOSTA have also been factors of the Tumblr ban and the censorship of queer sexuality in general. "The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) make it illegal to knowingly assist, facilitate, or support sex trafficking. SESTA/FOSTA makes website operators like Verizon or Facebook criminally and civilly liable for sex work and sex trafficking that is aided and abetted by online communication on their platforms."⁵⁶ These laws make it to where online sites will purge any sexually explicit material for fear of being sued or held liable. If sex work is associated with sex trafficking, it keeps those involved in sex work silent. The two things are completely different, yet once you conflate the two, it functions to silence any who support sex work for fear of being labelled as a sex trafficking pimp. Currently, sex workers and queer porn producers are facing censorship on other social media like Facebook and Instagram. Max calls this censorship "shadow banning," the content of which resembles the erasure that Tumblr was participating in. "Basically, if we use the hashtag 'queer,' that is banned. It's limited. They

⁵⁵ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 4 of transcript.

⁵⁶ Bronstein, 241.

have to filter through anything like ‘lesbian,’ ‘queer sex,’ ‘queer porn’ and basically the hashtags don’t go anywhere. So, our audience is staying small.”⁵⁷ Instagrams of Burlesque artists are getting shut down and given the economic climate of COVID-19, this is how many make their money. “It’s brand recognition...Kim Kardashian can post her super sexualized photos. Gay men typically can still post a lot. They can be in tighty-whites and nothing else, showing everything. It’s kind of like this fucked up hyper patriarchy on Instagram, and I think that the way we trick them into letting us play is we’ve got to show them that we have marketing power.”⁵⁸ The fact that you have to prove the monetary value of your work to even have a voice places a double standard on society where as long as you participate in the right kind of sex, you get to have a voice and opinions. Everyone else does not exist.

Porn literacy programs may be a solution to this censorship. Perhaps people would feel less threatened by alternative forms of sex if people were taught from a young age to navigate the porn world with mind to critical thinking. Some topics that have been proposed for such programs include “(1) shame and acceptability, (2) sexual communication and consent, (3) body and genital image, (4) the realities of sex, (5) sexual functioning, (6) safe sex, and (7) porn as education.”⁵⁹ Other potential programs have gone into deeper analysis of porn and how it relates to social norms and contemporary issues specifically “the history of obscenity regulations...social norms related to gender, sex, and violence...commercial sexual exploitation,” etc.⁶⁰ Critical thinking about porn and sex is something that is necessary for such programs to have an effect. It is believed if young people are given the chance to critically

⁵⁷ Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 13 of transcript.

⁵⁸ Shaw, pg. 13-14 of transcript.

⁵⁹ Kate Dawson, Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, and Pádraig MacNeela, “Toward a Model of Porn Literacy: Core Concepts, Rationales, and Approaches,” *Journal of Sex Research* 57, no. 1 (January 2020): 4.

⁶⁰ Emily F. Rothman, Nicole Daley, and Jess Alder, “A Pornography Literacy Program for Adolescents.,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 2 (2020): 154.

discuss porn and question the common tropes of porn, they will be better situated in their daily social and sexual lives. In terms of porn literacy programs for LGBTQ+ sexuality, hypersexualization and fetishization of LGBTQ+ groups must be discussed, as “such messages may be particularly damaging for young people who are struggling with their sexual identity or coming out and may mislead youth regarding the perceptions of LGBTQ+ people in society or what is expected in same-sex relationships.”⁶¹ This leaves an opening for queer porn to be introduced in porn literacy programs as an alternative, thus queer porn would have more of a voice in this “porntopia” of ours. When asked about the efficacy of a porn literacy program in schools, Max mentioned,

I think it has to go along with like a shame literacy... But if you're talking about it in school, and you're like “here's how you safely search the Internet,” “here's how you find out what you're into,” then we also have to talk about not shaming the person who's into queer sex or shaming the person who's into trans women sex which is a whole other side of the conversation. I don't know that I would trust anyone to handle that conversation well in a high school setting. But I think it's a start, a great start, because if it's the same as abstinence [then] not talking about it doesn't solve the problem.⁶²

Overall, a porn literacy program would require a willingness to talk about sex and porn with adolescents, teens, and adults, a conversation that historically has not been dealt with well by our social and governmental institutions. However, it is a start. Porn literacy programs and utilizing critical thinking could transform our sexual society into a possible sexual utopia. Yet, to achieve this, voices of sex workers must not be silenced or erased.

Queer porn could perhaps be a better education tool than academia as it is far more economically accessible than higher education. Queer porn has the ability to reach those who do

⁶¹ Dawson, Nic Gabhainn, and MacNeela, "Toward a Model," 11.

⁶² Max Shaw (queer porn producer), pg. 10-11 of transcript.

not get the opportunity to take classes on gender and sexuality. Thus, it is important to make queer porn more accessible for those people, so they no longer have to live in sexually repressed silence. The queer alternative to mainstream porn is more accepting, more mentally and socially healthy, and has the ability to help heal traumas, some of which have origins in their mainstream peer. Max Shaw and his partner Nicole hope to create a safe space for queer sex and desires and to increase accessibility to queer porn. However, it will require grand scale societal changes to really assure that LGBTQ+ sexuality is not erased but revered.

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Transcription of the Interview with Max Shaw

Rebekah Gredler: To start off, how would you define queer porn because I know it's notoriously hard to define.

Max Shaw: Um, yeah, it's really hard to define. I think anything that's not within the boundary of cis/het normativity would be queer. Anything that wants to be or wants to push that boundary a little bit. And I think, two, the other part of it is, like, not for the male gaze. You know, I struggle with some of the porn on some of the mainstream sites of like lesbian porn as not...it doesn't look like anything any of us have ever done.

R.G.: Yeah, I agree.

Max: You know, it's hard to feel represented in the umbrella term of queer in the porn world unless you look like the actors on mainstream. And there are, like, good porn sources but you have to pay for them which I'm all for but it's hard. I know when I was in college, that wasn't what you could find easily, you know. So, I think making queer porn accessible is really important in making it more of the like, when you search "queer" on any of the mainstreams you actually find queer porn instead of just like normative style of sex and these key words. This morning I looked on one of the sites just for queer just to see what's out there and it was all like really aggressive language, you know, like so and so plows this person. That's not my experience with queer sex. Most of the time it's much more tender and intimate than what's out there. And I think that includes different bodies, different body-shapes, different colors, you know, of skin colors and everything, abilities is really important. Um yeah, just not what's out there.

R. G.: So, like, I saw in some of my reading that most people defined queer porn not by, like, the sex acts that were being done but by the bodies that were doing them. So, it's more like queer exhibiting the queer bodies and not, like, what they're doing. Would you agree with that?

Max: I would, yeah because I think queer sex is such a huge spectrum and so it's hard to pinpoint and say "Oh, well, if they're doing these three acts then it's a queer sex act." You know, it's the bodies that are performing them, but it's also, I think, the identities of people that are performing them. You know, my partner, for all intents and purposes was straight until we got together, um, like, publicly identified as straight even though privately she identified as queer, you know, and so her sex before was still queer sex but it wasn't framed in a way that most people would agree with. The way she had sex was still very queer even though her partner wasn't. So, yeah, I would definitely agree with that.

R.G.: I guess we can move on to two. I guess this would overlap a bit. How is the work you do queer rather than mainstream? Like what are specific differences like I know authenticity and realness are things I saw again and again.

Max: Yeah, well, I think, you know mainstream porn typically has a lot of money behind it, production value, studio space, right. And we have a studio in our house and a couple of side studio sets, you know, but I think that it's...the porn we make is made by queer people and I

think that's the difference. We've taken this kind of like camera crew or production company out of it that may have their own interests or their own idea of what queer sex is and just given it to ourselves. And I think that's part of, like, the rise of queer porn in terms of OnlyFans is that people are getting that autonomy for the first time. So, we're able to say these are the bodies we want to represent, this is how we want to represent them, these are the things we're going to include and, like, the literal lens which we're going to film our porn through. And I think our style of porn and content creation is much more personal and intimate. One, we're filming ourselves so that helps with the intimacy factor and we get total control. But it's also just going to be closer, lit more, you know, warmly and more comfortable, less harsh and less anonymous than a lot of the mainstream porn can be where it's kind of scripted and you're like "you do this and then there's this and then you end with this kind of sex." So, um I don't know if that answers your question...

R.G.: No, that does. So, number three, in the quote you gave me you said that your and Nicole's goal is to "create a safe consensual porn studio that produces quality artistic films and represents all bodies and abilities and gender expressions." Can you expand on that and how are you going to achieve it? What have you got so far?

Max: So we met through Burlesque so our world was kind of inherently sexual and sensual when we met and our friends are very into like voyeurism and exhibitionism, so that made this a lot easier to conceptualize and make a reality because we have people around us who want to watch us but also trust our artistic vision to film them and so when we started talking about doing this, we had a lot of friends who were like "Oh, I would love to do porn but I don't know how to safely do that" or "I don't know where I would even start." And so, we have a photo studio in our house so it was kind of a natural progression to be like "well if you want to, we could maybe do like a porn package" and have people come and talk about what they want to experience with someone they're already partnered with in some capacity. Communication is the biggest part of it and even amongst just ourselves, we've been together for several years and we still negotiate and talk about like what we like and what we want, what feels good, what doesn't. So, when we get to the stage where we film other people, really having that in place of contracts and privacy, talking through with the performers what is okay and what isn't. What is the safe word? You know, very basic consent. We're lucky in that our friend circle and professional network is mostly Burlesque dancers who, many of whom, are sex workers or sex worker adjacent. So, there's lots of organizations specifically in Seattle, there's Ms. Brick House is a performer who does a monthly all-POC Burlesque show but she also just started right before COVID an all-POC sex party that runs monthly so hoping to partner with her, she's a friend of ours, really provide a low-cost or free porn studio for people of color so they can express and have this content for themselves. Yeah, and just really marketing, starting with the Burlesque community and say like "you know us, we know you, let's start making...I'm making the move from photography to video, here's our studio come play, come tell us what you want and we'll make it happen. From there, we want to branch out beyond that to maybe just couples who want a sex tape for themselves to watch. In Seattle there's a homemade porn festival called Hump. Have you heard of it?

R.G.: I have not.

Max: It's cool but it's very sensationalized, so it's very like, it's like the most, I don't know like they want to grab your attention, so it's a lot of for lack of a better word nasty films so it's a lot of like pushing the envelope as far as you can go in the kink world and so we're trying to meet somewhere in the middle of that of like you don't have to go like full leather hood and water sports. Queer sex can still be this other thing too. It doesn't have to just look like this. We're really lucky, just geographically where we are, there's a lot of sex worker resources and a lot of like exhibitionism and porn theaters. That'll make our job a little easier. Finding performers and finding people who really want to help us build our vision out.

R.G.: Now, do you have a timeline yet of when you guys can start? I know it's really unpredictable right now especially in California.

Max: Yeah, it's hard because we take one step forward and three steps back. Yeah, I mean, we were hoping for this summer to really get the studio done and have people in but it just doesn't look like we will be in the clear so we're probably looking another year out before we can do it. It's just no one is wearing their masks and taking it seriously.

R.G.: Do you see the work you do as political or not? Why or why not?

Max: Definitely. I think both Nicole and I are very political on our social medias and as individuals, in all aspects of our life. We live in this little town that's kind of an army town, so we're the only queer people on our street that we know of. So, there's kind of a target on our back all the time because of that. I used to be really afraid of that, now I'm just leaning into it. And then you throw sex, sexuality, porn on it and it's even more political especially with SESTA-FOSTA, Instagram. Since we started, we've since archived most everything on our personal performer Instagram because of shadow banning and Instagram rules and Facebook is out to censor us. Censorship is in full-swing for sex workers. PayPal is involved and they're shutting down performers' accounts that are linked to it. It's political. They're trying to take our money, our power, our autonomy, our pleasure. I think that if we were doing something not political or not disruptive to the norm, they wouldn't care. But they do and they care a lot. There is a lot of money being thrown to make us quiet. We're trying to just rise above that and be even more in your face. I think we all breathed a little easier after the most recent election but there's so much work to do. Sex workers are still not a part of the national conversation when we talk about decriminalizing anything. Everyone is panicked about sex trafficking and then the bill that was designed to stop that has just totally ended so many sex workers' way of income. We're on the fringes of society in that we're queer but also because we do sex work and I would imagine even more if we were brown and visibly disabled. Yeah, it's kind of the forgotten, most vulnerable population that we take for granted and everybody uses and everybody enjoys. Everybody uses porn in some way and Instagram and Facebook which are our ways to connect are being taken from us. I think it would be a really big disservice to sex work and the history of sex workers to not be political with it. We have all these tools, all these resources right now to unionize and come together and really make a change. We're hoping to be just a little part of that movement and talk about it. People have no idea about these things. You hear that OnlyFans is a

quick way to make money and so you jump on that. You've got to honor the legacy of the work of people who came before you and the risk. It's not just a fun thing to do because you're bored at home. There's still a tremendous risk on it. I'm out to my family about everything but the fact that we do porn.

R.G.: Speaking of social media, were you all ever on Tumblr?

Max: I was. I think Nicole was too. Tumblr got me through my college years, for sure.

R.G.: You know that in 2019 or 2018 that they banned all NSFW content. I mean, I remember, so I started college in 2017 and that was like right when I was coming to terms with being a lesbian. I went on Tumblr and I was on there for a few months and that kicked in where they banned everything. Honestly, that was primarily why I was on Tumblr because it had some good shit, pardon my French.

Max: Totally!

R.G.: Do you see that as, for sure, censorship? They put it under the guise of child pornography which is the go-to based on what I've seen to demonize anybody who falls outside of that mainstream. Would you agree?

Max: I would, yeah. I think it's definitely censorship and I think they always put it in terms of like "gotta save the children." I think it's really dangerous to do that. We were on Tumblr, that was kind of our main, I had forgotten because we stopped using it right away because of the censorship. But that was such a good archive of content that doesn't normally get seen. It was a safe place to post NSFW photos, it was a safe place to tease out videos and gifs. I think it probably got banned because kids, people under eighteen technically, were probably finding a lot of queer porn and porn on there to begin with. I know I did as a teenager, fan-fic was the thing, it was how I learned a lot about myself and my sexuality. I think that censoring it there just drove people to more of the mainstream sites and then it's just another way to filter the content to make sure that everybody is seeing these things that come through this lens from the mainstream porn conglomerate. So, I think that's really damaging. I think it just pushes the narrative on Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr. It just makes it easier for them to say we don't exist and that has real repercussions in the real world because you're like "Oh I've never met a sex worker or I don't know a trans person" and it's like "Well, you do." It gave people a private life to live instead of just the public one which for a lot of us as queer people, that's all we have. I came out online before I came out in person as everything, as lesbian, trans, queer, sex worker. So, I think that taking that away is really damaging for us.

R.G.: I know that the ban they created was like a safe search for those under eighteen. There was some issues where say you typed in "gay" or "lgbt," nothing was coming up meaning they were banning content whether it was NSFW or not, everything to do with LGBTQ+ in general and they got caught doing that more than once. It shows that it goes beyond even that of sex.

Max: Like they're erasing us.

R.G.: Yeah, yeah. Because, I mean, just talking about your experience of coming to terms with yourself, the internet was a big thing and that's something I've seen and something that was important to my coming out. In things I've read, Tumblr was something that came up more than once. I was surprised at that. I had more than two articles just about the influence of Tumblr. It's amazing how they're really trying to make it as this undesirable way of life.

Max: Exactly, they want that kid who's sitting in the middle of nowhere to search "gay" and have nothing come up. I can't imagine. That would be so isolating. Especially during the pandemic. This is all a lot of us have.

R.G.: I mean, you could argue that lack of visibility was the reason I was gay until I was eighteen, until I went to college and had that emotional, mental epiphany, because I got out of that space where it wasn't really in front of you. Straight people are around you and that's what you were, you didn't even think about it.

Max: Compulsive. "I gotta be like that to be accepted." It's definitely censorship and I think they get away with it as blatantly as they do because we still live in such a bigoted society. We're still an afterthought. And it's changing but it's not changing fast enough. They're evolving too in their tactics.

R.G.: How is the production of, the background work of, queer porn more ethical and safe compared to the productions of mainstream porn? Like I know you talked about consent and I know that's something that I also read where like consent is big, bigger than in mainstream.

Max: Definitely, and I think CrashPadSeries is one of the most successful queer porn companies. They're out of San Francisco. Something that they do in their porn that I really love and we hope to do as well is show all the negotiations so they show all the actors talking to each other, they show the debrief of like "how did that go for you?" "what did you like?" "how did this feel?" So, I think normalizing the conversation part of sex is really important. I think queer sex typically tends to have more of that negotiation because there's more ways to have sex. Especially with a lot of cis men, they're very much alike. Like "this is what we do and how we do it." I think queer folks tend to understand the need for safety and the need for communication and the need for the different ways to reach pleasure at least in my experience. There's also the safe sex part of it. "Have you been tested recently?" Taking out the stigma of that is really important. There's still so much stigma. Talking about STIs and normalizing it. Talking about cleaning your toys. You know, just all these things that go into sex but you don't see in porn. Then you watch mainstream porn and you start having sex and you're like "Oh, there's all these other things I guess aren't sexy to do." Like ask to be kissed or ask to touch there or all sorts of things. Really just modelling that is invaluable because there's not a lot. Outside of CrashPad, I don't think I've really seen it. There's some women-led porn studios that tend to be mostly straight that they show a little bit of the negotiation and kind of give the illusion that the woman is in power. But again, who's behind the camera? Who's directing this scene? Who's profiting on it? Is it queer people? Is it women? Or is it another cis guy in an office? So, tying back to the idea that we're keeping the commerce among ourselves and the power amongst ourselves and I think that's a big

part of safety. We're not just handing over the footage to someone to edit how they want. We're going to make sure all the way through that it's what the people want, that it's what we want.

R.G.: So, like taking control of all of the productions of your identity basically.

Max: Yeah, exactly.

R.G: Instead of putting it in the hands of someone who doesn't identify as that so they aren't going to capture the reality.

Max: Exactly. We talked a lot about what it would look like if we shot with someone else, even with like CrashPad, right now they way I would read on screen would be as a woman and I can't trust that someone else isn't going to be like "two lesbians," you know, whatever descriptors they put on it can sometimes be so gross. So, showing trans men that look like me is important. Showing trans men of all types, trans people of all types. The element of control and autonomy is really important for queer people to have because we don't get it in so many areas of our life. So if we can get it in our most intimate areas, if we can help people feel that, I would imagine it would be healing. It has been for me.

R.G.: This is a very general question. If you want to into a specific story or whatever, you can. How do social norms and society in general shape your work if at all? Do you find yourself censoring yourself sometimes because of how it could potentially be perceived? Do you catch yourself and say "Well, no, fuck that. I'm going to do whatever I want"?

Max: That's a pretty constant argument in my head. I'll just speak for myself. When I got my first CrashPad subscription, I was probably like 25. I paid for it and I never looked at it again because I couldn't find that kind of porn a turn-on. I'm still struggling to unlearn and kind of like decolonize my idea of what is sexy because I grew up on mainstream porn. I grew up watching typically pretty violent not like the hard-core stuff but even just sex can be really violent sometimes [specifically] depictions of men fucking women. I internalized a lot of that and still do in terms of how I have to look when I have sex, what I have to do, who I have sex with, what it looks like, what positions we use. It's a conscious choice to rebel against that and it's really hard to rebel against all that that has been ingrained even just in my own body and mind and to pull myself out of that even in the moment of sex and watching myself back and having people respond to it has been really healing. Because it's like "Ok these are just my perceptions, it's not the reality of what other people see or feel when they look at me. This is all my stuff." So, if I can gain confidence in squashing that and perform more authentically, that's the milestone I have to reach before we can really get this going, I feel like, because it is damaging. My sexual relationships before Nicole, we didn't talk about sex, we didn't explore, it wasn't playful, it was kind of this like, I don't know how to describe it. It never looked like the sex I wanted to have. It was like very heteronormative still even in queerness. People have their own ideas about transmen and for me, typically, it meant that people wanted me to be the pursuer and still take on this very masculine role in a relationship. It wasn't until I got with Nicole—she's like a high femme, power top and dabbles in dominatrix stuff, she's a badass, she's amazing—that I started to really let myself seek pleasure the way I actually wanted, not the way I felt like I was supposed to. I think a lot of queer people have that same kind of feeling of like not feeling free in

their sexuality because of how you're supposed to...you know all these gender roles that we say we don't subscribe to but still permeate our lives in all these ways. You see it in mainstream porn. It's a lot of "lesbian stud fucks pretty femme." That's not typically the experience. There's so much more to us than that, but it's all we're given.

R.G.: Yeah, I really never realized how much of our lives were dictated by these strict gender roles until I went to college. I think you have to remove yourself from...so everybody has that high school education but going further than that, you read different things, you realize that gender is just a social construct. You also have to think about those people who don't get to go to college. They're going to be stuck in this way of thinking that isn't a reality. It's just a social creation. It could really repress them. I mean, they're living this life that, that it's just not them, you know. It was hard enough for me to go to college. I've got loans out the ass. So, it's just making that decision to further your education or not go into debt, it's a hard decision.

Max: Definitely, and especially if you have any overlying identities, like if you're first generation, if you have a disability, it's hard. There's all these barriers to education. It's easy for people to, again, think we don't exist in the ways that we do because "Of course you go to college, and you have a phase." Like how many times do we hear that? You're making me think that maybe this queer porn could be a way for people to access that education or to have these realizations without having to go to college and take a gender class. Because even if you go to college, if you're going to college for a business degree, you're probably not taking Dr. C's Gender and Society class.

R.G.: I'll tell you that any Women's and Gender Studies class that was labelled with like word "gender" or "women's" or anything, I will tell you the majority of that class is women and maybe one guy. I'm taking American Gender and Sexualities and there was one guy. I took an African-American History class in my high school. It was a class that I felt was extremely important especially where I was, it was a very rural area. Very few white people took it. It was something that you had to actively say "I want to take this." Honestly, I felt like it should be one of those required classes because it would have been so beneficial for the social climate of that county. It's like if you don't identify as that identity, people tend to not want to learn about it almost, so it's something I've seen when it comes to race, when it comes to gender, sexuality. People who don't identify as that don't feel like they are going to learn anything from it or they think it's not for them or they're just uncomfortable taking it. I know that goes into issues of toxic masculinity and the idea of "what is a real man."

Max: Right, "can't take a gender studies class, can't have you respecting people." Yeah, there was always like one or two men in my class too and I never felt like they were there for actually learning. It was always like gotta get the brownie points or meet people. Yeah, what a difference if that was something we all had to learn about or was included in our curriculums in school. I went to Catholic school like a very conservative Catholic school, so we were told every day "gay people go to hell." Our school maybe had two or three people of color in it, but it was mostly white people who "you go to school, and then you're homeschooled until you go to high school and then you go to college to get your degree and a husband." There was no discussion of other

identities being acceptable. It was always like a fear-based “don’t be like them or you’re going to get AIDS.” Archaic ways of thinking. There’s a lot of work to do.

R.G.: I know you already kind of talked about this but what specifically drove you and Nicole to go down this path. You mentioned exploring your sexualities and healing traumas as some of the motivators. How did producing queer porn do that for you?

Max: We met through Burlesque. Nicole is a Burlesque dancer and I perform Burlesque a little bit, but I was working as a professional Burlesque photographer up in Seattle and I had seen her perform a few times. She was in a show and I, on a whim, asked her out and she said yes and we got together very quickly. Our friends, most of us have OnlyFans and most of us are very used to seeing each other naked. The lines between friend and lover get blurred a lot, so that made it easy for us to naturally start producing our own content because everyone was like “we wanna watch” in a less creepy way than that. There was a lot of people who were like “You’re such a power couple. Use this.” We very quickly were comfortable photographing and videoing each other and posting it online for people. So, I feel very lucky in that like there was less of a battle to get people who want to see us. Naturally, people started saying “Oh, we want to do this. We like how you shoot. Can you shoot us sometime?” So, it sort of like organically evolved which I feel very lucky for. In terms of healing, when we got together, both of us have had a lot of abusive relationships, sexual, platonic, family, all of it. Choosing pleasure and choosing joy and choosing to set aside time every day to actually play and connect was always really important to us because it just kind of drowns out everything. For me, thinking about how I never saw my body or my gender in porn, having someone who wanted to film with me who thought I was so desirable and told me that. We’ve been together for three years and I’m still like slowly getting there. It’s planting that seed a little more every day of being like “No, I am desirable and this does get to be seen.” Kind of shedding those ideas and societal norms that were put on me. For Nicole, she’s gotten to just totally reclaim her power. She works in the beauty industry and has been mostly straight-perceived most of her life. For her, finding power in the new types of sex, the power-play during sex, how she keeps her body hair is really empowering for her. Kind of being this high femme who maybe doesn’t look like anyone queer that anyone has seen before, but coming in and being “Well, I’m queer and this is what it means” and really flipping that narrative of femininity on its head and what queerness looks like. It’s healing for us personally and then to get to share it is another layer of healing and community and then when we’re able to bring in other people, it will be even more of a layer of community and healing and safety. It’s been a hell of a few years politically for us. I think it’s important to play and you know if we can reach people and have people say “Well, this helped me come to terms with myself or ask for what I need more,” that’s the goal. Five years from now if we can have people who love themselves a little harder because they’ve gotten to see themselves through a safe lens, then that would be the dream. That’s our end goal. It’s not about making money. It’s about changing queer people’s lives.

R.G.: Speaking of the Trump years, how did that tumultuous four years affect your work, your mental health? Do you feel it affected it in any way like the discourse that was going on?

Max: Definitely. It had a couple different manifestations in my life. It was a lot of fear, a lot of wanting to hide under a blanket and not leave the house. I was thrown into a building in Seattle about a month after he was inaugurated and got a really serious brain injury. It changed my life. I was going to go to grad school now I just can't. That was really devastating and really scary and set me back a lot. But now, being on the other side of it, I wouldn't have met Nicole, I wouldn't have come to Olympia where I live now which is about an hour South of Seattle. All these other doors opened up to me from that and I feel like if that hadn't happened, which was a direct result of Trump being in office, I wouldn't have found all these other avenues for healing including porn. I never would have done porn with another partner. I just never felt safe enough to. [It's] just kind of cemented in the forefront of my mind that people don't want us to exist publicly as trans people, as queer people, as sex workers. Some days, that sends me back into the closet and makes me mad and sad and some days, that's what lights the fire under my ass to go out there and be louder and less tuned down. You know, "you're not going to censor this." And [it] gave me the agency to really like speak up and stand up for other people and other identities too because it really was like they're going to come for whoever they can and there's going to be no one left but proud boys and that's not what we want. That's going to hurt everybody even the people who think they're safe. That's something we'll be healing from for most of our lives probably. We were on such a path forward in terms of marriage equality and trans rights and Biden came in and has put a couple things in place. The fact that he's saying the word transgender is huge. But it's also like that's our celebration point? He can say our name, our identity in public? Let's move forward.

R.G.: How do you think porn affects the LGBTQ+ community? You can talk about mainstream porn and queer porn because they're two different things. Is it harmful? Is it affirming? A mixture of both? How so?

Max: I think it's a mixture of both. I think mainstream porn has its benefits...yeah I don't know what a benefit would be right now. I've been so cynical about it. But in terms of like exposure to different types of sex like gay porn is still a thing that's mass produced and pretty mainstream. It's typically very like masculine, able-bodied, cisgender, men. So, I think for people in those communities, it's probably really beneficial and affirming. And I think for those of us who think we're in those communities like for me, I've enjoyed mainstream porn for sure and I learned a lot. But I think, I'm thinking specifically of trans women who are so fetishized, black men who are so fetishized in porn and then the brutality that goes along with that is very damaging and I don't think it's something that's initially damaging but something that like spreads into our culture, into ourselves over time. Hopefully, we can get to a point where we can talk about that and like name it and take the power back, but I think for most of us who are passively consuming mainstream porn, it is more harmful than good. I think there's a lot of underage stuff, there's a lot of sibling stuff on the mainstream sites and I think that's really damaging to people like incest survivors, young people, you know, It's odd to me that we go out of our way to block "sex trafficking" through sites like Craigslist, Personals, and Backdoor but you go on to Pornhub and it's "Teen Destroyed by..." you know...

R.G.: It's glorified in porn

Max: Yeah, that's someone making money off of that.

R.G.: It definitely points out the hypocrisy of that agenda.

Max: Yeah, definitely. It spreads into the beauty industry where you have to wax all your pubic hair off and you have to look a certain way. So, I think on that level it's very damaging. Queer porn can be really affirming. I just wish it was more accessible. I wish that if you searched "FTM" it wasn't just like skinny, typically white men with top surgery who look, you know, their genitals is like the surprising fetishized factor. I don't think I've ever seen and transman that is bigger bodied or brown on mainstream porn. Putting queer porn behind a pay wall and, I mean, CrashPad is a couple hundred dollars a year, is going to be a barrier. People aren't... a teenager isn't going to be able to view that and I mean like an eighteen-year-old, twenty-year-old, you're not going to be able to afford that and explain to your parents why there's a you know... "what is CrashPad?"

R.G.: Yeah, I'll tell you. I've never purchased a queer porn. I go for free. But I'm very specific as to what I want. I mean I'll look up specific "real lesbian couples" because that's what I like. If I'm going to watch it, I want it to be real. I'm very specific in how I do that and I know which keywords to use and how to filter through but I mean that comes with time and figuring out what you like.

Max: Exactly. And while you're filtering through, you're still internalizing so much imagery and messages. Yeah, I'm with yeah. You have to get really specific. So, I mean, part of our hope is to really help break that barrier and get queer porn into queer people's hands, show that real intimacy between people and what queer sex can be and whatever your thing is, go for it. You can explore here. Especially with like Instagram and Tumblr censorship, like the main sites are where we're getting queer porn for free and I don't know if that's always a good thing unless you have the time to really sit and filter through and really search and be specific and have the ability to filter through all those really damaging messages while you are searching for pleasure.

R.G.: Do you think a porn literacy program would be beneficial like starting from a decent age like in schools so people understand porn better? I read one article that mentioned that as a possibility. I honestly think it would be a good idea. I watched porn from a very young age because it was the beginning of the Internet age. I was right at that cusp where most people had access to the Internet. Everybody I knew had seen porn. Definitely by high school. It's a reality whether they like it or not. You're going to have to deal with it because if you don't deal with it, people are going to accept those messages and you're going to keep having this violence against women, violence against the LGBTQ+ [community]. There needs to be something, in my opinion. Do you agree?

Max: Agree. And I think it has to go along with like a shame literacy. I don't know if that's the right [word]. But if you're talking about it in school, and you're like "here's how you safely search the Internet," "here's how you find out what you're into," then we also have to talk about not shaming the person who's into queer sex or shaming the person who's into trans women sex which is a whole other side of the conversation. I don't know that I would trust anyone to handle that conversation well in a high school setting. But I think it's a start, a great start, because if it's

the same as abstinence [then] not talking about it doesn't solve the problem. Have you ever watched *Big Mouth* on Netflix?

R.G.: Yes, I have. I love it.

Max: I thought their episode was really good where he's up all night watching porn and is like so frazzled by the end and they're like "Ok, you can't just look at everything like you've got to pare it down." I think that our generations and the generations above us are starting to have those conversations and it's showing up in media. It just needs to be more. I wouldn't have been allowed to watch *Big Mouth* as a kid. We're kind of straddling the line between the old way of thinking and the new.

R.G.: I was lucky to have that come out my freshman year of college, so I had no more parents telling me what I could and couldn't watch. That's a show that I know a lot of people that I go to school with watch and love because it's so like "Damn, what the fuck, I didn't know anybody could make a show [like this]". The first episode I ever watched blew me away because I was like "damn, nobody ever talks about this stuff."

Max: We always say "I wish I had had this when I was a kid." I wish I had been able to sneak away and watch this show because it would've changed things. So, yeah I love the idea of porn literacy.

R.G.: I mean, I feel like it would be hard. I feel like if it did start, it would start in the more liberal, more open areas. I think trying to do it in certain places like in Virginia, there would be a lot of pushback because it would just be like "Oh, you're introducing porn to kids. That's like introducing sex to kids. What's next?"

Max: In Washington, we just had a law pass in our last election that was comprehensive sex ed meaning that it would talk about the LGBTQ identities and bodies, sex, and safe sex practices for those identities. Getting this bill passed was so much red tape, protests every weekend about it, you know like "save the children." I had a coworker who came in after election day crying because the bill passed. And even in the bill, it's like you can opt out of it, your kid isn't going to have to take this, but no one reads it. A coworker crying and getting ready to move to Montana because she didn't want her son to be transgender and thought this bill would make him transgender and that's in Washington. It's wild. I just think about like how nice that you get to choose to opt out like even in this very basic bill, you still have to choose to opt out. But your kid is on TikTok and you're learning about all these things.

R.G.: There's no way to keep it from happening now because of the Internet. It's not possible. Kids hide stuff from their parents. I know I did. I watched porn on my parents' computer. It's going to happen. They'll find a way. You've got to deal with it ahead of time so they know what they're doing.

Max: Exactly. Our puritanical society when it comes to sex really makes no sense to me.

R.G.: I think the lack of discussion about sex will also be a barrier to porn literacy because sex isn't something that's talked about in open spaces. Nobody is going to want to talk about sex or

if they do, it's like "Ooh, we're talking about sex!" Our society has to deal with our aversion to talking about sex before we even get to that point.

Max: It wasn't until I was in the Burlesque community that I was surrounded by people who talked openly about sex and kink and porn. Even in college in the gender and sexuality classes, you don't talk about "sex". It's like this exciting topic that feels to intimate to share. Normalizing talking about it because if you can talk about it with other people, you can talk about it with your partner. Like ask for what you want or explore things that you want. Just take the shame out of it. It doesn't need to be this private thing.

R.G.: I'd love to know what the source of this American sexual shame is. My brother-in-law, he's Italian, grew up partly in Europe. Sex over there is completely different. Like you can show a woman's breasts in ads on TV and it's not an issue, but if you did that here, we would lose our shit.

Max: You can't even show cleavage on Instagram anymore.

R.G.: Yeah. I don't understand where our weird American puritanism came into play and why we're still stuck on it.

Max: It's politics and how closely the Christian church is to our political system. They have a lot of money to keep us afraid of sex, because all it's doing is creating a bunch of repressed, traumatized people who think they don't deserve pleasure.

R.G.: When repression leads to anger, it leads to violence, you have violence against that community. It's just like the cycle keeps on continuing and somebody's got to like break it down and deal with these big concepts that we're not dealing with.

Max: Yeah, there needs to be like a sexuality task force or something. But that's liberal propaganda so...

R.G.: Ah, yes of course. So, how has your experiences in queer porn shaped your sexual and gender identity?

Max: I think when I was consuming mostly mainstream porn, I kind of set myself up to be this like boyfriend character, the pursuer, the top, like very masculine in relation to the femininity. And then in deconstructing that for myself, I learned that I'm not that at all. I don't have to just give pleasure; I can also receive it and what does that mean? And that's tied to feelings of self-worth and service. I think mainstream porn had me thinking that that was like a finite thing. Like "I am this and this is how I relate to people during sex." And then queer porn kind of opened my eyes to like "That can change. It can be fluid. It doesn't have to be like boyfriend one day or girlfriend the next. I can play in all of that and talk about it and explore. Through that, I've healed a lot of my trauma and my insecurity about how I look and that sort of thing. It's definitely changed my life and right now I'm not on T and I haven't had top surgery. That is something I hope to do. Again, COVID kind of screwed those plans. But knowing that I can transition on film feels really cool and feeling safe to do that and show more of what that process is like. I've been on T before so I know that it changes how I have sex and how I relate to my

body, so I'm excited to have that documented too. Honestly, I don't know if I would be wanting to get back on T and really like transition again without being able to perform and have video. I don't know. It's kind of just given me agency over my gender identity and sexuality in a way that I never had before. And Nicole being my partner is a big part of that because she is definitely like that safe person to explore and play with. So, I feel really lucky to have her as my romantic partner and my creative partner and my scene partner.

R.G.: What are benefits that an audience receives from viewing queer porn that they likely wouldn't get from viewing mainstream porn?

Max: I think you touched on it with the porn literacy part of it. I think being really explicit in the consent talks, the boundary negotiations, the safe-sex practices, and kind of like peaking behind the curtain a little bit and seeing what actually happens on a porn set ethically. I hope that people see themselves represented. I hope people feel like they can come to us and make their own film privately or publicly and just see themselves and start that exploration and that play. Because, for me, I spent most of my life, you know, sex with the lights off, no one wants to see it. That's for home. And having sex on camera and sharing it with people and having people be like "Wow, this is really sexy!" I'm like "Ok, now I can shed that idea that I'm not sexy or desirable." It's still a street fight every day to feel like I have self-worth and that I'm light years ahead of where I started. So, if we can provide that for people in a safe way that's also this beautiful film, [then] that's my hope. And I think it'll translate to the audience. I think having that authenticity and connection and intimacy and showing that like negotiating the boundaries is sexy. Safe words are sexy. Being respected and talking during sex is sexy. Kind of shed all that narratives that say you have to fast-forward through all that stuff and just get to the fucking. I'm hopeful that it reads and I think it will. We've had a lot of interest and a lot of good engagement on our Instagram which is mostly archived now because of censorship. Yeah, I'm hopeful.

R.G.: As am I. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?

Max: I had a thought this morning in the shower of like why they are censoring us from Instagram the way they are.

R.G.: Specifically, what are they doing?

Max: Shadow banning

R.G.: So, what is that?

Max: Basically, if we use the hashtag "queer," that is banned. It's limited. They have to filter through anything, like "lesbian," "queer sex," "queer porn" and basically the hashtags don't go anywhere. So, our audience is staying small.

R.G.: So, it's like what they did with Tumblr.

Max: Right, yeah. And unfortunately, a lot of Burlesque artists are having their Instagrams shut down, so you're losing all of that network, all of your followers which is how most of us make money especially right now. It's brand recognition. It's everything, because it's not family-friendly enough. Burlesquers and sex workers too are having to constantly like create new rules.

It used to be you could just post a picture of a nude body, but Kim Kardashian can post her like super sexualized photos. Gay men typically can still post a lot. They can be in tighty-whiteys and nothing else, showing everything. It's kind of like this fucked up hyperpatriarchy on Instagram and I think that the way maybe we trick them into letting us play is we've got to show them that we have marketing power. People want to pay for queer sex. People want to see queer bodies.

R.G.: So, you have to prove the monetary value of it before...

Max: [Before] you can play the game.

R.G.: Sounds like capitalism alright.

Max: Right! And most of us are like "Fuck capitalism. I don't want to play that shit." But I think we have to survive and I think that it's doubly fucked up because you have people who are selling their bodies for work and labor and sex work. That's getting shut down, but people can sell, you know, how much does Kim Kardashian make on an Instagram post? Who's profiting on that in this big way? It's all capitalism and I think we have to adapt to it and play the game a little bit and it's soul-crushing to do that. Because it's all fucked up and rooted in oppression. It would be cool to see a queer porn artist get a sponsored ad for a hundred thousand dollars. Imagine the community power that would have. There's just so many layers to it and so much intersection of oppression. I wish there was a platform that wasn't tied to Facebook and Tumblr was it for a long time where we could just share uncensored art, but you have to make money on it. Different rules apply for the desirable.

R.G.: So, is it hard to find sponsors for queer porn because of the stigma?

Max: Again, we're lucky. In Seattle, there's a lot of sex worker community and porn community, there's a lot of porn theaters. Burlesque is a huge part of the Seattle entertainment industry. We have a fetish show that happens when it's not COVID that's really well done. But we're still kind of pushed to the end, it's not the same level of sponsorship. What we would love to do is have people sponsor experiences for people, so have people sponsor a shoot in a film package for queer brown folks or people who are differently abled, so kind of that smaller scale sponsorship. The only queer people I see on Instagram who have sponsors are like super fit, muscley, able-bodied cis men. And it's usually by mainstream companies. Queerness is almost not a part of their brand and we want queerness to be our brand.

R.G.: Yeah, I've seen how lesbian couples or queer women couples will get that or will get sponsors on YouTube or Instagram, but it's almost assimilationist in how they produce their content. You could argue that it becomes almost heteronormative but not heteronormative because it's two women. Do you see that a lot on Instagram? Do you feel like there is this assimilationist aspect to the community? That there is a part of it where they want to get away from the stigma and become like "normal" society rather than sticking to their guns and doing what they want to do?

Max: Definitely. I think it's tied to our society's ideas of what is desirable. Right, because it's typically the lighter skinned, white, able-bodied, fit, cis people who do really well or get sponsored. When we started our Instagram account, our couple Instagram, we looked at a lot of

lesbian couples and it was very stylized and it looked like a screenshot from a mainstream porn. I think about some of the photographers I know who are on Instagram still for their boudoir and erotic art. The things they post are not the work they're hanging in the erotic arts festival. They're still watering down and censoring. You have to survive. That's just to stay on the platform. To get sponsors, I would imagine is even a bigger level. I mean it goes back to who's profiting on it? Nicole is trying to become a cannabis model like a brand girl. Her tagline is "Olympia's Highest Femme." We're big stoners. That will be interesting to navigate as she gets into that because I would imagine her successful things are still going to be the watered down [things] where you forget she's a queer woman. But it's also like "Well, yeah get your money...like put some money in queer people's hands. I had a conversation with a friend a few years ago who was a nonbinary sex worker in Seattle and they were telling me about how everyone always asks them "How do you get into queer sex work? That seems like the dream. Queer sex work, you don't have to deal with cis men." And they were like "No, I deal with cis men all the time. That's who my main clients are." I mean, you've got to assimilate and play the game a little bit. I think for everyone it's just a different level of like "What are your boundaries?" and "How far are you willing to go?" to play the game and get some money. At the end of the day, we are working in capitalism and are so disenfranchised as from having real wealth as queer people. Most of us are cut off from our families, so that intergenerational wealth is gone. There's trauma histories, all of it. My tendency is to be like "Ugh, they assimilated and it looks so heteronormative" and then this little voice in my head is also like "but they're getting their money." I just wish the same opportunities were available for people who maybe didn't look like them or black and brown bodies, disabled bodies, all bodies, more tattoos, not just the neatly packaged easy to digest lesbian and gay man that our parents are comfortable seeing. But "trans people can't exist." It all kind of intersects in the porn world in the sex work world and I think that's why sex work has always been such an institution. It is kind of this microcosm for everything else going on in the world and they get hit the hardest.

R.G.: So, have you ever had to face the stigma of "sex work isn't work?" "It's not real labor." Have you ever had to deal with that?

Max: Yeah, all the time. We don't do full-service sex work, so it's not like we're going out and getting clients. So, my experience is not through that lens. I'm not out to my mom about sex work, so over COVID, my job closed down and then about six or seven months of unemployment. Every phone call with my mom was like "You've got to get a job," "How are you going to pay the bills?" and so I did. I went and got a job and now I'm working forty hours a week and I hate it. I have no energy. But I got that paycheck, that above board paycheck. Nicole only works eight hours a week. Every conversation with my mom now is like "Why doesn't Nicole work more?" and I can't tell her "Well, she has an OnlyFans. She is supporting us." It's still pretty taboo because I know my mom would freak out. When I was performing Burlesque, she found out somehow and called me and was like "Why are you taking your clothes off at night clubs? Are you doing drugs?" Even with Burlesque, there's definitely stigma. You tell people that you do Burlesque or your partnered with a Burlesque person. Everyone's like "Oooh, that's so like risqué" and it's really not. It's dancing and music and you just happen to take your clothes off. It's kind of like queerness in that I monitor who I tell and when. I'm very lucky at

my job. I work with dogs, so I'm able to say "I'm a sex worker. Like this is what we do on the side" and my boss is totally cool with it, but my last job wouldn't have been. It could be something that I get fired for. Kind of unrelated but we breed dogs and train dogs and that's a pretty substantial amount of income for us. It's a lot of work, but even that my mom doesn't believe is a real job. She's still like "But you've got to use your college education. You're not using it." Anything that's not working for someone else directly, our society is like "but that's not real work." Whenever someone at work talks about sex work or says something kind of against it, I've gotten really good at being like "You sell your body all day. You have carpal tunnel because you stand here and groom dogs for eight hours a day." You're selling your body. There's a time limit on how long you can do this work.

R.G.: Everybody is selling themselves if they have a job. You're selling your labor. It's only the content of that labor that changes.

Max: Right, it's a lot of work to brand yourself and seek clients and network. So, there's definitely anti-sex worker attitudes everywhere. One of my biggest pet peeves is people will use "ho" and "whore" all the time. I'm like "that's not your word." I don't even use it because I don't do full-service sex work. Like that is someone who has sex for money. On all the media, that's what everyone calls each other. Even at my work, people use it all the time. It goes from like small levels of microaggressions to anti-sex worker policy being enacted [like] the QANON shit.