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Performing “I Do”

Weddings, Pornography, and Sex

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Several times a year, I am invited to weddings. When the invitations arrive in the mail, I am always genuinely touched. I like being included in the circle of family and friends drawn together on the guest list, and I always pore over the invitations. I trace the embossed lettering on the heavy paper; I sort the envelopes, the reply card, the onion-skin covers. I always RSVP promptly, knowing how difficult it is for caterers and couples to pin down the numbers. And my reply is always the same: “I regret that I will not be able to attend.”

Weddings make me angry. I am angry at our culture’s demands on the bride to expend inordinate amounts of time, energy, and money. The emotional costs of these expenditures are tremendously high, and I ache for the bride-to-be as she is consumed—for months—with orchestrating the event. I am angry at the

fictional “ideals” of perfect weddings, whether produced by *Bride Magazine*, Britain’s royal family, or *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Who could replicate such perfection? Most of all, I am angry that “the bride’s big day” is her one moment in the spotlight. Why does our culture offer so few moments for women to shine? To be the center of attention? And why should *this* moment, as she is passed from father to husband, be valorized? Such fuming makes me a very bad guest at weddings, so I know better than to attend.

About as frequently as I receive wedding invitations, I watch pornographic videotapes. This is an admission, I realize, that places me—a white, heterosexual, middle-aged feminist—at precarious odds with antipornography feminists and the Christian right, as well as in the middle of debates about family values. As I watch porn, I experience the same

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anger prompted by weddings: What are the emotional costs of this? Who could replicate such perfection? And, again, most important: Why does our culture offer so few moments for women to shine? To be the center of attention? And why should *this* moment, as she is passed from partner to partner, be valorized?

Weddings and pornography are too often seen as opposites: Weddings traditionally represent, enact, and perform social order; pornography traditionally represents, enacts, and performs social chaos. From a performance perspective, however, weddings and pornography are surprisingly the same: They are both cultural performances; they both depend on the intent and consent of their participants; and they both arise from historical conventions determined by church and state. Most important, they both have sex at their center: A wedding ceremony must be consummated by sexual intercourse, and hard-core pornography must depict penetration and ejaculation.

Weddings and pornography, I propose, are not opposites. They are *mirror doubles of the cultural performance of sex*. To support this odd statement, I feature specific words in that sentence. As *cultural performances of sex*, weddings and pornography are socially and politically organized to serve culture: They create insiders and outsiders, rules for appropriate sexual behavior, and performance frames that fluctuate between play and belief. As *cultural performances of sex*, weddings and pornography both depend on the successful enactment of conventions and scripts, performance consciousness of the performers, and the imposition of frames of belief and play. As *cultural performances of sex*, they both hold consent and sexual intercourse as their *sine qua non*. As mirror doubles—not mirror opposites—they are complementary and mutually dependent: If there were no socially *sanctioned* coupling through weddings, there would be no socially *demonized* coupling through pornography.

This construction of weddings and pornography as complementary cultural performances shifts the emphasis from *sex* as the operative term in the pornography debates to *performance*. In the rhetoric of pornography debates, various camps use the term *performance* to describe and to evaluate the content, performers, audiences, and discourses of pornography. Depending on their divergent political agendas, these camps conveniently condemn, embrace, erase, or displace the term *performance* to describe the sex in pornography.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first half details how weddings and pornography are performances with similar ends and means at the service of culture. The second half examines the use of the term *performance* in the pornography debates. Together, weddings and pornography serve to control sex—how it is constructed, enacted, and policed in contemporary culture. When the bride and groom say “I do” and the porn actor climaxes on the breasts of his video partner, these performances create sex that is either approved or condemned, but always warranting culture’s control.

WEDDINGS AND PORNOGRAPHY AS PERFORMANCES

With the metaphor of a centrifuge, Dwight Conquergood (1986) claims that all cultures have “a moral center,” or core of organized social values. As cultures spin, they “throw off forms of themselves—literally, ‘expressions’—that are publicly accessible” (p. 58). These “expressions” are performances—from events as varied as the off-key, but sincere, rendering of “Happy Birthday” at a family get-together, the carefully choreographed and polished Broadway musical, and the liturgy of the Catholic Mass. How to make sense of such a wide variety of forms and functions called performance?

In 1972, Milton Singer coined the term “cultural performance” to describe performance

events unique to a particular culture. Common cultural performances in the United States include the Superbowl, Mardi Gras, the Miss America pageant, and the Democratic and Republican national conventions, to name just a few. Singer claims that all cultural performances have similar characteristics: a limited time span, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, audience, and place (p. 71). Cultural performances usually involve large numbers of participants and observers. As both public and ceremonial, “display and exhibition” are the purposes of the performers, and “the bodies of the performers are their instruments” (Stern & Henderson, 1993, pp. 26–27). Most important, cultural performances are “at the service of the culture, and the ceremony is designed principally to reinforce cultural values and to solidify social organization or stimulate political action, rather than principally to please and entertain” (Stern & Henderson, 1993, p. 27).

Weddings easily adhere to this definition of cultural performance—as ceremony, as display, as site of cultural values:

Although there is no such thing as “the typical American wedding”—as many styles of weddings exist as the styles of citizens given them—every single one possesses the same ritualistic ingredients, the same replay of ancient custom and primeval symbolism, the same predictable plot and standard players. A wedding is, after all, a wedding. (Seligson, 1973, p. 4)

But pornography, too, is a cultural performance—as ceremony, as display, as site of cultural values. All cultures have expressions deemed pornographic, “but not every culture distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic, nor is pornography defined in the same way in every instance” (Findlen, 1993, p. 53). Sallie Tisdale (1994) maintains that “the sexual material of a culture reflects that culture’s concerns,” and she details differences:

In America, the adolescent rut—eternal erection and ready orgasm. In England, book after book about spanking, sex across class lines, and a detailed interest in underwear; in Germany, leather-clad blondes whipping swarthy men; in Italy, an interest in feminized men; in Japan, a preoccupation with icons of innocence (schoolgirls, nurses, brides), soiled innocence (widows), and maternal nurturing. In Japanese pornography active female pleasure is considered a turnoff. I’ve never seen an American film that didn’t feature it. (p. 138)

Weddings and pornography are cultural performances that both reflect cultural concerns and offer an opportunity for us to be reflexive about those concerns. For Richard Bauman (1992), cultural performances mirror “some primary cultural realities such as values, patterns of action, structures of social relations, and the like” (p. 47). As opportunities for reflexivity, studying what might be available in the mirrored reflection, “performance may be seen as broadly metacultural, a cultural means of objectifying and laying open to scrutiny culture itself” (p. 47).

In both weddings and pornography, performance is the vehicle for intention and consent. The phrase “I do” is a performance that enacts a contract, and contracts must be consensual to be valid.¹ Moreover, for a marriage to be legal, it must be consummated through sexual intercourse. Likewise, the making of pornography is one of the few forms of “degrading labor” that must “emphasize that its conditions of paid employment are not just contractual . . . but that they are also entirely consensual” (Ross, 1993, p. 224). Both weddings and pornography are consensual contracts consummated in and through the performance of sex.

The “performative contract” is only one way to view performance of sex. Conquergood (1998) explains that performance has been theorized in three different ways: “faking,” “making,” and “breaking.” “Faking” was the centerpiece for Erving Goffman’s (1959) conception of performance—the deliberate roles

constructed and embodied in the “presentation of self in everyday life.” Good students “act” the part—paying attention in class and asking good questions—just as good scam artists convince us of the sincerity of their roles in a “con job.” Victor Turner (1987) shifted the emphasis from faking to “making.” Individual and collective performances make cultures through the embodied and participatory enactment of structured forms—such as “Happy Birthday” and the Catholic Mass. Postmodern and postcolonial theorists emphasize performances that “break” conventional roles, events, and structures. Drag performances, for example, break the conventions of gender, demonstrating that the performative rules for masculine and feminine can be put on, or taken off, at will.

Weddings and pornography involve all three kinds of performances. Both weddings and pornography can be faked, they make relationships, and they can break the cultural structures that form them. Most important, when weddings and pornography are examined as making, breaking, and faking sex, they reveal the political stakes in these cultural performances of sex.

Making, Breaking, and Faking Weddings

Current marriage formalities still derive from the long-standing concern of Church and State to control who is and is not married, and is still based on verbal consent (followed by sexual intercourse, otherwise the marriage is voidable) made in an authorized place (church or register office) in front of an authorized person, and then recorded at the General Register Office. (Leonard, 1980, p. 12)

Wedding ceremonies are acts “made” through performance at the intersection of church and state. Whether the ceremony takes place in a sacred or a secular setting, all wedding ceremonies are “rites of passage.” Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960) coined this phrase in 1908 to describe and to

classify ceremonies that move individuals from “one situation to another, or from one cosmic or social world or another” (p. 10). For Van Gennep, the wedding is a rite of incorporation, uniting two people. His description of wedding rituals and rites from cultures across the world is a fascinating one, especially when these rituals are compared to contemporary U.S. weddings.

All ceremonies include some combination of giving or exchanging belts, bracelets, rings, or clothes which are worn; binding one to the other with a single cord; tying parts of each other’s clothing together; touching each other reciprocally in some way; using objects belonging to the other; . . . offering the other something to eat or drink; eating together (communion, confarreation); being wrapped in a single piece of clothing or a veil; sitting on the same seat . . . ; entering the new house; and so forth. These are essentially rites of union. (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 132)

Weddings also follow the three-fold structure of all rites of passage:

a separation from the old phase, transition through a liminal period, and incorporation or aggregation into the new phase. The ritualized celebration (we might say “performance”) of such a change signals the personal and communal significance of the event, providing a pattern of behavior for those involved that is simultaneously conventional and symbolic. (Rehm, 1994, p. 5)

The liminal period,² the wedding ceremony itself, is almost always fraught with the betwixt-and-between doubts of “What will happen next?” punctuated by the traditional question in many contemporary Christian ceremonies, “Is there anyone present who knows why these two should not be joined in marriage? Let him speak now or forever hold his peace.” Long a stock phrase and dramatic moment in soap operas, melodramas, and romances, this moment in the ceremony is the

crux of the wedding's liminality as a rite of passage. The kiss at the end is the promissory note for sex to come, as well as the demarcation of safe passage through the liminal space.

Weddings are more than rites of passage, however; weddings also "make" private sexual relationships a public and state concern. In ancient Greece, the purpose of marriage was to sanction "a relationship between a man and woman which had the primary goal of producing children and maintaining the identity of the *oikos* unit (the household) within the social and political community" (Patterson, 1991, p. 59). The Catholic Church in 13th-century Europe made marriage a sacrament—with its insistence on a priest officiating—as a way to consolidate its power over individual behavior, as well as to protect women and children "from easy abandonment" (Johnson, 1996, p. 45). First-wave feminism five centuries later was, in large part, a reaction against women as chattel, owned by their husbands, granted in the contractual agreement of marriage (Ettelbrick, 1992). Even today, marriage is seen as a way to curb the promiscuous sexual activity of men, as if "bachelorhood [is] equivalent to moral lassitude, where all sexual expression outside wedlock is morally tainted" (Johnson, 1996, p. 47). Indeed, the church and state join forces to create a sanctioned relationship that serves many "idealistic" purposes: procreation, economic stability, sexual regulation, and the maintenance of unequal gender roles.³ Art critic Dave Hickey (1997) maintains that a community's *highest* interest is manifested in its construction and regulation of courtship and sexual relations; hence, each culture maintains elaborate cultural constraints against and rewards for coupling appropriately.

In the United States, state marriage laws are under constant revision—testifying to the cultural and political shifts in what is considered appropriate "coupling."⁴ For the past 15 years, gay marriage has been high on the cultural radar and in the courts. In 1991, three

couples in Hawaii tested same-sex marriage as a politically and socially viable contract (Eskridge, 1996); in 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that the denial of same-sex marriage was a violation of equal protection under the law. As proponents and opponents made arguments, the implicit norms of heterosexuality, procreation, and gender roles in the state's interests were made visible in legislatures across the nation, culminating in the passage of the "Defense of Marriage Act" by the U.S. Congress in 1996. This act guarantees federal privileges for different-sex marriages and maintains the states' rights in denying recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states. In 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled gay marriage constitutional. In November of 2004, 11 states held and passed referenda that banned gay marriage, to much media speculation about its impact on garnering votes in the presidential election.

As cultural performances reflective of social, political, and religious values, weddings serve several important functions: They *grant* political, social, and economic privileges to their sanctioned participants but, conversely, *create* outsiders to those entitlements; *instantiate* sexual norms; and *depend* on frames of belief for their efficacy. What is too often lost in the gay marriage debates is the long list of political and economic benefits that come with state-sanctioned marriage. Chrys Ingraham (1999) lists 10 federal entitlements that range from the convenient to the monumental and 24 state entitlements that run the gamut of life's activities.⁵ Our culture carefully protects these privileges when policing and regulating their dispersal through marriage.

Although numerous churches and congregations are recognizing same-sex unions and performing church-sanctioned ceremonies, most are not labeled "weddings." They are called "bonding ceremonies," "celebrations of commitment," "blessings," "union ceremonies," or other euphemisms (Sherman, 1992). Despite

the media's portrayal of same-sex marriages during the 2004 presidential election, even the gay community is divided on same-sex marriage: "It is both radical and conservative. . . . For some, gay marriage is unnatural or abominable. For others, it is an assimilative sellout" (Eskridge, 1996, pp. 4–5). In the discourse about same-sex marriage, the implicit assumptions of heterosexuality, procreation, sexual regulation, and asymmetrical gender roles are unveiled when church, state, and community are unable to reconcile religious doctrine with political policy. Performances of weddings that "break" the bonds among the sacred, performance, and the state, like gay marriage, expose the underlying assumptions of the institution of marriage, assumptions that have much more to do with contracts—heterosexual, fiduciary, and proprietary—than with relationships.

While gay couples are demanding equal access to these privileges, a second group of "outsiders" are those who will *lose* political and economic privileges *if married*. The Rev. Wallace Tervin offered his services through Ann Landers' (1998) syndicated newspaper column to "Florida Jill," an "80-year-old woman who had met her sweetheart at the senior center and wanted to marry him but didn't want to run the risk of losing her pension and health benefits from her previous marriage. Living together was out of the question" (p. 2D). Ann Landers "blessed" Rev. Tervin for his benevolent offer to "marry" the elders in a church-sanctioned, state-less wedding, but Rev. Tervin had certain stipulations: "I must first be convinced that a true commitment exists and the couple's belief in God is the motivating factor behind their request. Secondly, I must see that a legally binding wedding would cause undue hardship because of the resulting loss of pension or medical benefits by one or both parties" (p. 2D). Here the contract shifts its emphasis: Although the state may *deny* economic privileges to same-sex couples for violation of the heterosexual contract, the church ensures that the state does

not *withdraw* economic privileges from elderly, God-fearing heterosexuals.

These contractual obligations and privileges instantiate sexual norms. That is, they police who should and who should not have church- and state-sanctioned sex. Church and state are an elaborate check-and-balance system in regulating "coupling": Homosex/uality is dangerous, subversive, excessive, and should never be sanctioned by the state; heterosex/uality at 80 is harmless, laughable, doubtful, yet still deserving of sanction by the church. The respective lines drawn in the sand by church and state cross each other at the most normative—gender-, age-, and blood-appropriate—intersections. Always and already at the center of this diagram is sex. Organizing society around "sexually connected people is wrong," according to American University law professor Nancy Polikoff. "The more central units are dependents and their caretakers" (quoted in Johnson, 1996, p. 48). The truly radical approach to the gay marriage debate would be to withdraw *all* state and federal entitlements from marriage: no more insurance benefits, tax breaks or penalties,⁶ inheritance rights, or any other automatic benefits for *anyone*. Then the debate would involve the *unearned privileges*—not the sex or gender of the people seeking recognition of their union—in the eyes of church or state.

If the state, performance, and the church "make" weddings, and "breaking" with these conventions reveals their underlying normative sexual structures, then weddings can also be "faked."⁷ Here the performance frames created in and through the ritual guide the actions of the participants. Under the tutelage of Victor and Edie Turner, graduate students in the Anthropology Department at the University of Virginia staged a wedding. Their collective goal was to move anthropology out of the cognitive realm into the experiential and to gain "the actors' 'inside view,' engendered in and through performance, as a powerful critique of how ritual and ceremonial structures are cognitively presented" (Turner, 1987,

p. 140). As the Turners unpack conclusions about this performance of wedding, one stands out:

Most participants told us that they understood the cultural structure and psychology of normative American marriage much better for having taken part in an event that combined flow with reflexivity. Some even said that the fabricated marriage was more “real” for them than marriages in the “real world” in which they had been involved. (p. 144)

For the Turners, the wedding was a smashing success—as educational play. The stakes for the performers, however, were elided. “Of course,” write the Turners, “in a real marriage the couple’s intentions are all-important. They must seriously ‘intend wedlock’” (Turner, 1987, p. 142). Although Austin’s performative utterance, “I do,” is operative here as both intention and consent, the Turners’ easy claim about a *real* marriage is much too simplistic—for gay couples in Massachusetts and for Florida Jill—and glosses over the state-performance-church matrix in the creation and maintenance of insiders-outsiders, appropriate sex, and performance frames.

Making, Breaking, and Faking Pornography

“Pornography” names an argument, not a thing. We have always had obscenity, at least as long as we have had a scene of public, reportable life that requires a zone of darkness to lend sense to it by contrast. (W. M. Kendrick, 1987, p. 31)

Pornography, too, is a particularly interesting interplay of “faking,” “making,” and “breaking” sex, and, like weddings, pornography is “made” at the intersection of the church, public performance, and the state. In

The Invention of Pornography, Lynn Hunt (1993) argues that, indeed, pornography was invented: “pornography was not a given; it was defined over time and by the conflicts between writers, artists and engravers on the one side and spies, policemen, clergymen and state officials on the other” (p. 11). In 16th-century Europe, the availability and consumption of print pornography was made possible with the rise of the printing press, burgeoning markets of literate consumers, and the desire of both church and state to monitor and regulate behavior in rapidly shifting political and cultural times.

Most literary historians agree that pornography in Europe—written by and distributed among the elite classes of white men—was not considered a “problem” until the works of Pietro Aretino in 16th-century Italy. The “first modern pornographer,” Aretino laid the groundwork for pornographic conventions in print that would last for centuries across Europe: “the explicit representation of sexual activity, the form of the dialogue between two women, the discussion of the behavior of prostitutes and the challenge to the moral conventions of the day” (Hunt, 1993, p. 26). Paula Findlen (1993) characterizes the sea change in pornography with the works of Aretino:

Aretino was more dangerous than all the erotically inclined artists and humanist pornographers put together, not because of his frank portrayals of sexual behavior but because of his refusal to restrict his audience to men of virtue who were allowed to read the erotic classics due to their “eloquence and quality of style.” (pp. 101–102)

The state and the church converged to produce lists of “banned” books and to criminalize their production, sale, and possession, thereby “making” pornography a distinct canon, a canon that even Rousseau evoked in Book One of the *Confessions* as “those dangerous books that a beautiful woman of the world finds bothersome because, as she says,

one can only read them with one hand" (quoted in DeJean, 1993, p. 110).

The audience, canon, and conventions of print pornography in 16th-century Europe also created a distinct cast of literary performers in pornographic texts. By writing sexual exploits as if heard from the mouths of courtesans and courtiers, street prostitutes and learned noblemen, and by centering much of their descriptions on anal intercourse between men, pornography created a "third sex"—writers of pornography, sodomites, and whores. Contemporary same-sex marriages, elderly pensioners, and the "third sex" of pornography are "outsiders" created by the performance of heterosexuality, procreation, and normative sexual contracts:

Neither [prostitutes nor homosexuals] had to answer for the procreative relations between men and women, but their omnipresence in pornography and everyday life threw into doubt the stability of the heterosexual regime. Their membership in the so-called third sex gave them a privileged view of the practices of others and, thus, empowered them to speak, quite literally to "authorize" a portrait of society. Their gaze, however, was not the pornographic one, though they existed to foster it. Instead, it was the critical gaze of the pornographer, who looked into the souls of men and told them what they least wanted to hear. (Findlen, 1993, p. 107)

Indeed, weddings and pornography, as and when "broken" performances, create and maintain "insider-outsider" roles through normative cultural assumptions about sex. In Robert Stoller's ethnographic interviews with pornography industry workers, he reiterates the claim of the 16th-century "third sex": "The primeval joy in pornmakers is 'fuck you,' not 'let's fuck'" (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 119).

The "making" of pornography experienced another sea change, however, with the invention of motion pictures. Pornography was no longer limited to still depictions of sexual acts

in engravings, paintings, and photographs, and the "performance of pornography" was no longer simply the "writing" of pornography. Indeed, with the invention of film, "performance of pornography" became the "performance of sex." As Steven Marcus (1974) claims, film was what the genre of pornography "was all along waiting for," as language in literary pornography had only been a "bothersome necessity" (p. 208).

The difference between "faking" sex and "making" sex has long been the line of demarcation between soft-core and hard-core pornography. Here the performance frame, like that of "belief" in the ritual of weddings, is implicated. The codes and conventions of hard-core porn depend on an ironic tension between "real" sexual acts within "faked" sexual contexts. In nesting boxes, the performance frame of hard-core pornography implies "faking." Still, the sex taking place within that "let's pretend" frame is very real; and the autoeroticism, if masturbation is the result of pornography's "singleness of intention" (Marcus, 1974), of viewers is also very real. Indeed, the tension in pornographic film between "faking" and "making" sex and the concomitant "breaking" of sexual norms creates its own opposite; that is, the "breaking" of sexual norms "makes" pornographic conventions, and the "faking" of sexual contexts "makes" sexual acts possible.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Viewing weddings and pornography as complementary, not oppositional, cultural performances allows the mirror metaphor to reveal striking similarities: Both weddings and pornography depend on the state-performance-church matrix for their histories and current enactments, slipping among the making, breaking, and faking of sex. They both create insiders and outsiders to the rights and privileges granted by church and state. They both erect interchangeable frames of belief and

play for their performances. Most important, they both hold sex as and at their center.

Indeed, it is not the presence or absence of sex that is problematic for weddings or pornography; rather, it is the word *performance*, as it slides across the field of social meanings in the service of political agendas, that mobilizes the discourses surrounding pornography.

THE USES OF PERFORMANCE IN THE PORNOGRAPHY DEBATES

Sex is at the center of both weddings and pornography—as both implicit and explicit assumptions. In the institution of marriage in the West, sex is the physical complement to the performative utterance “I do.” Marriages must be *consummated* through sexual union. The centrality of sex to weddings is most apparent in its noncontroversial acceptance as a cultural practice—until, of course, outsiders question its exclusivity, norms, and privileges. Sex is also—inescapably and controversially—at the center of pornography, a proverbial battlefield with its multiple camps, strongholds, generals, foot soldiers, and defensive strategies. Indeed, the rhetoric of war pervades the pornography debates.

It is surprising, however, that a rhetoric of performance also pervades the same debates. If pornography is seen as a cultural performance at the service of society, then the camps aligned around pornography—pro, con, feminist, and postmodern—manipulate the term *performance* to serve their political ends, variously highlighting sex, erasing sex, or replacing sex in their use of the word *performance*. *Performance* as a term slips and slides around the pornography debates in four ways: performance is doing, acting, evaluated, or representation.

Performance No. 1: Doing Real Sex

Almost all theoretical treatments of hard-core pornography, despite their widely divergent

agendas, begin with the declaration that the performers are engaged in real sexual activity. Stoller defines pornography as “adult men and women performing, not simulating, erotic acts” (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 3). Linda Williams, feminist film theorist, begins her definition with the distinction between “real” and “faked” sexual acts, landing on “performance” as doing.

A first step will be to define film pornography minimally, and as neutrally as possible, as the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers. What distinguishes film and video pornography from written pornography—or even, to a lesser degree, from still photography—is the element of performance contained in the term *sexual act*. (Williams, 1989, pp. 29–30)

For antipornography feminist Susan Cole (1989), pornography “is a practice consisting of specific activities performed by real people” (p. 18). For Marxist philosopher Alan Soble (1986), such definitions of pornography are valuable only if they enable communication without the need for claims about truth or falsehood. Indeed, ground zero in the pornography debates rests on “performance” as the doing of sex.

For makers of heterosexual video pornography, the “doing” of sex is shaped by fairly limited depictions. Ira Levine, X-rated actor, assistant director, and screenwriter, distinguishes between hard- and soft-core pornography: “Hard-core is footage of people having intercourse, complete with genital close-ups. If you do not actually see the hydraulics—even if the players are really performing intercourse—it is soft-core” (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 16). Hard-core porn also has conventions of sexual activities—penetration, oral sex, and masturbation—and jargon to describe the performers—boy-girl, girl-girl, threesomes, and orgies. U.S. heterosexual pornography values “meat and heat” or “meat shots and money shots”—the graphic close-ups of genitalia, erections, and ejaculations.

In *The Film Maker's Guide to Pornography*, Stephen Ziplow claims: "There are those who believe that the come shot, or, as some refer to it, 'the money shot,' is the most important element in the movie and that everything else (if necessary) should be sacrificed at its expense. . . . If you don't have the come shots, you don't have a porno picture" (quoted in Williams, 1989, p. 93). The male orgasm is the organizing principle of U.S. heterosexual pornography: It punctuates, constitutes, and ends the performance as both the "visible proof of pleasure" (Williams, 1989) and the visible proof of the *reality* of the performance.

As performance, "Pornography in the making is nothing if not all-too-real" (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 234). This "reality" of *doing* sex in video pornography both undergirds and undermines the term "performance" in its subsequent uses.

Performance No. 2: Sex Workers Are Acting

Sex workers and filmmakers are quick to arrive at the word *performance* to describe what they do. Levine compares pornography to other aesthetic and athletic performances:

That cassette you are watching documents a spontaneously created physical performance, more related to dance or gymnastics than to conventional film or theatre. Elements of drama or comedy may be used to stage this performance, as music structures ballet. . . . Porn actors are physical performers. They're more like athletes than actors. (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 178)

Elsewhere, he offers further comparisons: Pornography is like burlesque, documentary (akin to footage of animal copulation), performance art, even the circus; the physical comparison most often made, however, is to athletics.

Indeed, Randy Spears, praised by all the production staff and crew interviewed in *Coming Attractions*, is the consummate "professional" X-rated video actor. Spears describes his performance—to maintain an erection and

to ejaculate both on cue and in the center of the frame—as a football game:

You want to be able to deliver when somebody leans on you like that. It's like, okay, there's one minute left, you're on the twenty, the quarterback's down, get in there and throw the long one. When you throw a touchdown, everybody's happy. If you bungle it, then the game is suffering. (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 171)

Nina Hartley, veteran porn performer, comments on her own awareness of herself as a performer: "I'm always thinking: 'back arched, stomach in, tits out, make a pretty picture and enjoy as much of it as you can'" (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 148). Hartley's description echoes Michael Kirby's (1995) continuum of acting and nonacting: Actors are "aware of an audience—to be 'on stage'—and they react to this situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions, and elements of their personality, underlining and theatricalizing it for the sake of the audience" (p. 47). "At what point does acting appear?" Kirby asks. "At the point at which the emotions are 'pushed' for the sake of the spectators" (p. 47). Hartley's description of her responses are, indeed, "pushed." "My responses are real," says Hartley. "I just turn the volume up. I magnify them because it is cinema" (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 153). Lisa Palac, founder of *Future Sex* and pornographic film maker, also lands on "acting" as characteristic of performance in pornography:

I don't care if the actors are really fucking or really coming. I don't care as long as I believe they're coming. Everyone knows that the people who are shot and killed in *Lethal Weapon* don't really die. They *know* what acting is. Why can't they believe pornography is acting, too? (quoted in Tisdale, 1994, p. 137)

For sex workers, "performance" is acting. Performance, as a label, is a safehouse and borrows from the legitimacy of other staged-for-the-camera performances—dance, film,

and sports. Sex workers, perhaps more than any other camp in the pornography battlefield, cannot escape the physical materiality of their work, but *performance*, as a term to describe it, rescues and legitimates the sex.

This rescue and legitimation, however, is always compromised by the *reality* of the sex. Female performers endure uncomfortable, if not dreadful, sexual positions in their performances of pleasure; male performers must display a markedly different performance competence. “Other men look at these pictures and say, ‘Those lucky sons of bitches. They get to fuck all these great-looking girls. I wish I could be one of them,’” says Ira Levine. Behind the camera and on the set, Levine continues with his insider’s viewpoint: “But when I watch [male performers] work, the impression is not of men having a good time. It is the impression of men doing a grim piece of work” (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 219).

The pornography industry values men’s and women’s performances differently. Women are valued, not just for their bodies and faces, but for their novelty—the “new girl” is replaceable when she is no longer new. Men are “valued primarily for their ability to perform on cue. Perhaps a dozen men consistently display that skill” (Schlosser, 1997, p. 48). Schlosser’s use of “perform” is, of course, a euphemism for maintaining an erection and ejaculating on cue, but this sense of the word *performance* is the double bind for “actors” in pornography. Men in X-rated videos have little room for failure “to perform” in the industry’s “search for wood”; after the third time it happens on a set, the man is no longer hired (Stoller & Levine, 1993, p. 93).

Acting, then, is very much a part of the discourse of performance of sex workers, but performance as “faked” is undermined by the “real” competence necessary to enact the conventions of the genre. Male actors perform in both senses of the word. Female actors, valued for a different performance competence, are not mined for their orgasm—always a dark

and mysterious interiority with no distinct visual “proof” of pleasure—instead, female pleasure is erased by both conventions and discourses of sex work. The “come shot” is the *sine qua non* of video pornography, but female orgasm is unrecordable, unspeakable, and—quite literally—unperformable. Tisdale (1994) interviewed numerous pornographic film stars, and Howie Gordon told her of his early days in porn and of his first scene with a woman he’d never met before: “We started, took about fifteen minutes, whoosh, everything was perfect. After we came—after I came—I said, ‘Do you want to come?’ And she said, ‘Are you kidding? In front of all these people?’” (p. 271).

Performance No. 3: Real People Watching Sex

The third use of the term *performance* is an evaluative one, and performance competence, according to Richard Bauman (1977), is always measured by the audience. *Audience*, however, is a terribly problematic term for pornography, and the term is rarely used. Instead, we are “viewers,” “consumers,” occasionally “spectators,” terminology that emphasizes the solitariness of watching and the explicit masturbatory effect of porn.⁸ The intent to arouse, after “real” sex, is a second uncontested component of pornography. At the same time, audience “desires” are implicit in the conventions of porn; “raincoaters” and “lunchbuckets,” the pejorative characterizations of the once-typical audience member, want “meat and heat.” As the typical venue for pornography has moved from adult bookstores and theatres to the neighborhood X-rated video store, however, the *typical* audience member has changed, too. Even 15 years ago, women accounted for 40% of X-rated video rentals (Williams, 1989, p. 231). If women now “consume” pornography in the privacy of their homes, then “the socially shared meanings” of “what arouses members

of the intended audience” (Soble, 1986, p. 110) is an ongoing reconstruction.

The relatively unproblematic “doing” of sex (no. 1) and the gendered problematics of the “acting” of sex (no. 2), now incorporate audience in this third use of the term *performance*. Here audience quickly splits into a number of factions, all attempting to capture and to evaluate performance competence—how well the performers fulfill their performance obligations.

*Performance No. 3a: Watching Real
People Acting Badly*

This, for me, is the most interesting tension between audience and performer in its reversal of performance competence: Because the performers are such *bad* actors, they are not really *acting*; they are simply *doing* (back to Performance No. 1). For Al DiLauro and Gerald Rabkin, this tension is the hallmark of the early stag film: “Here were real people and real sexual activity made all the more real because their esthetic embodiment was so weak, the ‘performers’ so clearly not ‘actors’” (quoted in Williams, 1989, p. 58).

The amateurism of the early stag film is returned to in the fastest growing component of the pornography market, “home porn.” These are “short videos produced by ‘real’ people, with ordinary bodies, who then sell the tapes of their sexual encounters for public viewing” (McElroy, 1995, p. 28). Wendy McElroy wonders about this return to amateurism, but she also lands on home porn’s audience appeal: “Buyers knew the action was real” (p. 29). Ordinary, aroused people—not actors, and by implication, not performing—hold a special attraction for audiences who value the “real.” Homegrown Video, an amateur porn company in San Diego, is one clearinghouse among many for amateur hard-core videos, taped and sent in by “real people” and then collected and distributed by the company. Schlosser (1997, p. 48) maintains “these crude

but authentic sex tapes” now comprise approximately one fifth to one third of the pornographic video market. “Authenticity” for this camp is measured, interestingly enough, by performance *incompetence*.

*Performance No. 3b: Watching Real
People Not Acting Married*

Although the audiences for (and against) pornography are divergent and multiple, it is surprising how many of these audiences cast the sexual performances in pornography over and against the performance of “married” sex. Indeed, in the 1986 report of the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, Commissioner Park Elliott Dietz blames pornography, not for its explicit performance of sex, but for its lack of performance of “married” sex:

A person who learned about human sexuality in the . . . pornography outlets of America would be a person who had never conceived of a man and woman marrying or falling in love before having intercourse . . . who had never conceived of vaginal intercourse with ejaculation during intromission, and who had never conceived of procreation as a purpose of sexual union. (p. 43)

This endorsement of love, marriage, monogamy, heterosexuality, procreation, and asymmetrical gender roles, at once made explicit and public by both church and state in the marriage contract yet performed implicitly and privately in the marriage bed, is thoroughly routed in pornography. This audience vilifies pornography not for the performance of sex, but for the performance of the wrong *kind* of sex.

A number of anticensorship feminists follow this line of argument, but instead of lamenting the lack of “married” sex, they celebrate it. Even if limited by the conventions of male-produced, male-oriented sexual scenarios, pornography is “one of the few areas of

narrative where women are not punished or found guilty for acting on their sexual desires” (Williams, 1989, p. 260). Moreover, pornography presents women’s sexual desires outside “zones protected and privileged in the culture: traditional marriage and the nuclear family” (Vance, 1984, p. 3). For McElroy (1995), both feminism and pornography

rock the conventional view of sex. They snap the traditional ties between sex and marriage, sex and motherhood. They both threaten family values and flout the status quo. Because of this, when conservatives look at both feminists and women in porn, they see homewreckers, harlots, and sexual deviants. (p. 128)

Pat Califia (1988, p. 16), self-described sexual “pervert” and writer, maintains that “sex alone can’t liberate us, but in the meantime it comforts us.” She continues:

Women want and need the freedom to be outrageous, out-of-doors, out-of-bounds, out after dark, without being silenced or punished by stigma, battery, forced reproduction or murder. We have a right to pleasure ourselves, and access to pornography is part of that. (p. 16)

So while the sex performed in these scenarios is not perfect, anticensorship feminists look to pornography for sex that celebrates female desire, is scripted outside marriage and procreation, and is one accessible site of pleasure. Ultimately, anticensorship feminists, like many sex workers, celebrate the breaking of taboos; again, the attitude is not “let’s fuck,” but “fuck you!”

Performance No. 3c: Watching Real Women Who Are Really Hated

If anticensorship feminists are watching female desire, antipornography feminists are watching female subordination, degradation, and exploitation. Here performance competence

takes an interesting turn. No longer is the performer “accountable to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out,” (Bauman, 1977, p. 11). Indeed, women performers are victims of, and unwitting perpetrators of, the sexist production, consumption, and depictions of pornography. Performance competence is erased and replaced with performance of consent. Antipornography feminists maintain the impossibility of consent and sexual pleasure in a patriarchal system in which the power imbalance always, already casts women as victims—in society and in pornography. In short, watching pornography is watching “concentration camp orgasm” (Williams, 1989, p. 21).

For antipornography feminists, pornography is not really about watching sex, but about watching the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women. For Cole (1989), “pornography is not a picture, or words or ideas, but a practice of sexual subordination in which women’s inferior status is eroticized and thus maintained” (p. 9). Ultimately, for Andrea Dworkin, sex is not really the performance of physical activities, but the dancing of attitudes: “sex is a medium to convey hostility and antagonism and ownership and control and outright hatred” (quoted in Stan, 1995, p. 60). Dworkin (1980) writes, “The woman’s sex is appropriated, her body is possessed, she is used and she is despised: the pornography does it and the pornography proves it” (p. 223).

The discourse of audience for antipornography feminists is a discourse of “other.” Industry jargon distances itself from audience as “raincoaters” and “lunchbuckets,” but antipornography discourse creates a symbolic order of the phallus, linking male audience members with male performers:

Pornography, like rape, is a male invention. . . . The staple of porn will always be the naked female body, breasts and genitals exposed, because as man devised it, her naked body is the female’s “shame,” her private parts the private property of man,

while his [genitals] are the ancient, holy, universal, patriarchal instrument of his power, his rule by force over *her*. (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 394)

Performance competence, measured by the audience, is a gendered construct here, too. For women performers and women audience members, no performance competence is possible in an a priori system of dominance and submission; for men performers and men audience members, performance competence is a given—as power, as violence, as will. Their performances are “picture perfect” posters for patriarchy.

Performance No. 4: There Is No Real, Really

For pornography, this fourth sense of the word *performance* places the emphasis not on sexual activity, performance consciousness, or on audience evaluation, but on representation. Here postmodern film theorists, cultural critics, and historians are interested in the tense relationship between the *real* and the *representational* created in the term *performance*. In Andrew Ross's (1993) astute summary of the history of intellectuals' debate about pornography, he notes that the focus has been on “the vexed relationship between sexual performances and real sexual conduct: often abstract questions about representation, its distance from the real, its place in and its effect upon the real, and its relation to fantasy and the construction of sexuality” (pp. 224–225). True to Ross's perspective, Williams (1989) arrives at the tension between reality and representation implicit in the performance of sex:

The genre of pornography . . . works very hard to convince us of its realism. . . . sex as spontaneous *event* enacted for its own sake stands in perpetual opposition to sex as an elaborately engineered and choreographed *show* enacted by professional performers for a camera. (p. 147)

This tension not only complicates pornography as a “realistic” genre but complicates all four senses of the term *performance*. Performance is a construction that falls in the middle of a continuum with language at one end and physical bodies at the other.

Still another move in this problematic definition of performance is the tendency to erase sex all together; here materiality of sex is elided, and discursive constructs envelope the entire continuum. Sallie Tisdale, Walter Kendrick, and Jean Baudrillard all claim that sex is not the subject matter of pornography at all. For Tisdale (1994), pornography is “a story we tell about ourselves—and maybe the only, or most revealing, way to tell certain secrets that are not necessarily sexual at all” (p. 140). Kendrick (1987) unpacks the rhetoric of metaphors in the discourses of pornography:

Metaphors are essential in this realm of discourse, because there seems, and always has seemed, to be no possibility of a literal statement. . . . [When Comstock] spoke of poisoned swords piercing tender flesh, or of diabolical parents giving their children scorpions to play with, he could count on arousing powerful emotions. The history of “pornography” is a political one [and its rhetorical metaphors] . . . sidestep the literal at every opportunity. (p. 218)

For Baudrillard (1997), “there is no longer any identifiable pornography,” as pornographic images “have passed into things, into images, into all the techniques of the visual and the virtual.” In advertising, “the comedy of the bared female body . . . is played out. Hence the error of feminist recriminations: if this perpetual striptease and sexual blackmail were real, that would be unacceptable” (p. 139). Phelan (1993) substitutes the “real” for “power” and makes a similar claim, “If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture” (p. 10).

Postmodern theorists, disclaiming the *real* but claiming its performance, have written sex

out of the pornographic picture. Sex workers, by comparison, cannot so conveniently erase sex or performance consciousness in their material practices. Language and bodies, for both anticensorship groups and antipornography groups, are defined conversely: as desire and agency on one hand and as coercion and victimization on the other. *Performance*, then, is the operative term for all camps in the pornography debates. The divergent, overlapping, and contradictory uses of the term unveil the politics not only of performance but of the cultural construction of sex.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR AT SEX

The sexual center of weddings and pornography is a reminder that “this culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent” (Rubin, 1989, p. 278). Married sex, created in and through heterosexual, age-appropriate, blood-appropriate consensual weddings, is our culture’s “proven innocent” sex; pornography is our culture’s “worst possible expression.” In both constructions, the relationship between culture and sex is an adversarial one: culture is a block to sexual drives, a means of redirecting and channeling sexual energies. This “hydraulic model” maintains that “sex is like a gushing stream whose force can be given full reign, or dammed, left to roam free or channeled into harmless byways” (Weeks, 1986, p. 8).

If cultural performances are always at the service of the culture, then what ends are created and served in the performance of sex? Weddings are expressions of, indeed, creations of, the need for order, control, stability. Every culture guards its coupling with implicit and explicit regulations, doles out rewards and punishments, and measures individuals by their enactments. Weddings are celebrations, ultimately, of individual complicity in societal conspiracy to control sex—the necessary channeling of the gushing stream.

What societal ends are created and served in the performance of sex in pornography? Here the gushing stream of sex takes two turns. Pornography is a destabilizing force: an unchecked, undammed, chaotic anarchy that undermines social orders of family, heterosexuality, and normative sexuality; for others, pornography is a stabilizing force in its perpetuation and valorization of women’s oppression and men’s power—just one more example of the status quo. Although the stream forks here, pornography is still a *force*, a rushing current of sex, and society conspires to control its performance.

There is no “pre-social” sex (Connell & Dowsett, 1992, p. 50). Sex cannot be attended to apart from the language, social systems, and material practices that create it. Pornography and weddings are not cultural opposites, but mirror doubles, complementary and necessary to each other for the construction of sex as always, already in need of control. There’s the rub in the mirror that is both reflective and reflexive. The complementarity of weddings and pornography is necessary to *complete* sex as control. Complementarity demands a partner, just as “Thank you” demands “You’re welcome” and “I’m sorry” demands “That’s all right,” to complete the communicative interaction and to reestablish balance in the relationship. Weddings and pornography thus demand each other to complete the construction of sex-as-control. If a culture’s most important interest is the control of sex, then the performances that perpetuate that economy are its most dear and unexamined, and the performances that subvert that economy are its most despised and problematic. Indeed, when cultural performance is approached as a mirror held up to a culture, it not only *reflects* basic cultural values, it *deflects* attention from the backdrop of control against which these performances are enacted. In short, we are so busy watching performances of sex that we forget to pay attention to the scenery—until, of course, a performance occurs that transforms the scene.

I've been married for 20 years. Nine years ago, I took off my wedding ring and decided I would no longer participate in that particular symbolism—a visible sign of my wedded status—in the Western institution of marriage. In the first few days after I removed my ring, I was uncomfortably aware of its absence: My left hand felt awkward and incomplete as I rubbed the back of my third finger with my thumb and felt the seemingly new, smooth skin, protected all those years by gold. I studied my fingers for days, and I was quite sure that my third finger had atrophied in more than a decade of stricture. It did not look as strong, as well formed, as capable as the others. Chinese foot-binding came to mind.

Ever since then, I have made a point of paying attention to the hands around me. Married women, I have discovered, wear wedding rings: From thin, plain gold bands to elaborate clusters and mixtures of gems to knock-your-socks-off diamond solitaires. Married men show no such variety, but they do seem to make a more fundamental choice. In my informal poll, the chances are 50% that a married man will not be wearing a ring at all.

Why the gendered difference? Although married women *seem* to have many choices regarding the *kind* of ring they wear, the choice *not to be marked* as married does not appear to be an option. Indeed, even considering it, for many women I spoke with, seemed unthinkable. Although weddings and pornography are mirror doubles, the images of our hands in that mirror are evidence of control: choices that are not choices and a gendered grammar of deep structures for coupling. These familiar, unexamined, unquestioned performances of sex—like wearing a wedding ring, like participating in a traditional wedding, like viewing pornographic videotapes—always manifest what we hold dear and what we despise.

Today, as I put an X-rated videotape into the VCR, I look at my bare fingers. I'm comfortable now with their blankness, the clean slate, my unmarked status. But I wonder, as the scene on the tape comes into view,

about my own complicity—my own loves and hates—in saying “I do.”

NOTES

1. Philosopher J. L. Austin (1975) proposed the term *performative* to describe a class of utterances that do not state something (“This is a room”) or describe something (“This room holds 50 people”); instead, the utterance is “the doing of an action.” His examples include “*I do*” in the wedding ceremony, “*I name* this ship” in a christening, “*I give and bequeath* my watch to my brother” in an inheritance, and “*I bet* you sixpence it will rain tomorrow” (p. 5). In each instance, the performative creates an obligation, a promise, and a relationship between participants. Parker and Sedgwick (1995) offer another example of a performative: “I dare you.”

2. *Limen* means “threshold,” recalling the threshold of a doorway between two rooms. All rites of passage involve the experience of an uncertain and dangerous moment, or “liminality,” in which the ritual participant is suspended between the two stages.

3. The inequality of gender roles and division of labor within the marriage contract have been elegantly argued elsewhere; two classics—Simone DeBeauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*—come to mind.

4. In 1967, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down laws in 16 states forbidding mixed-race marriages (Eskridge, 1996). According to Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute (n.d.), age of consent varies across states, the lowest being 14 (Alabama). There are also differences in some states according to sex or gender: Girls in New Hampshire can marry (with parental consent) at 13, and boys at 14. Most states set the age of consent at 18 (without parental consent).

5. Federal benefits include “access to military stores, assumption of spouse's pension, bereavement leave, immigration, insurance breaks, medical decisions on behalf of partner, sick leave to care for partner, tax breaks, veteran's discounts, and hospital visitation rights; state benefits include assumption of spouse's pension, automatic inheritance, automatic housing lease transfer, bereavement leave, burial determination, child custody, crime victim's recovery benefits, divorce protections, domestic violence protection, exemption from property tax on partner's death, immunity from testifying against spouse, insurance breaks, joint adoption and foster care, joint automobile

insurance, joint bankruptcy, joint parenting (insurance coverage, school records), medical decisions on behalf of partner, medical insurance family coverage, certain property rights, reduced-rate memberships, sick leave to care for partner, visitation of partner's children, visitation of partner in hospital or prison, wrongful death benefits" (Ingraham, 1999, pp. 175–176).

6. Many people have claimed that the "marriage tax" punishes married couples. Ingraham (1999) argues that the joint income of most middle and upper class couples affords them benefits (e.g., health insurance) that offset that tax. For couples living at or below the poverty line, however "marriage disqualifies many for the benefits they need to survive. . . . As the 1997 census data indicate, an increasing number of couples are choosing to live together without "benefit" of marriage in order to avoid losing these programs [food stamps, school meals, and child care], Social Security income, and some tax breaks. Ultimately, then, marriage only privileges those who already have the earnings to stay out of poverty" (p. 32).

7. Just as the "speak now or forever hold your peace" is a stock moment, the mistakenly "faked" wedding is also a common device on television situation comedies. Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, Rob and Laura Petri, the Howells on *Gilligan's Island*, even Greg's parents on *Dharma and Greg*, all found themselves "not married" through some technical glitch in the state apparatus. The comedic results of long-married couples being suddenly "not really married" throws their personal habits, and their socially sanctioned relationship, into question.

8. This solitary viewing was not always the case. Al DiLauro and Gerald Rabkin's *Dirty Movies* (1976) points to the communal functions of the early stag film (1896–1911). They claim that "smokers" were a ritualized setting for male bonding. Peggy Reeves Sanday, in *Fraternity Gang Rape* (1990), makes a similar, but much less celebratory, case for the group "consumption" of pornographic films in contemporary college fraternity houses. In both situations, male bonding takes place through, and at the expense of, women's bodies in pornographic film.

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Discussion Questions

1. According to Bell, what makes weddings and pornography complementary rather than oppositional performances?
2. Bell provides a listing of state and federal entitlements that come with marriage. Which do you think are of the greatest consequence? How would you feel about removing all these entitlements from marriage, as opposed to extending them to same-sex couples?
3. Discuss “making, breaking, and faking” sex in weddings and pornography.
4. What do weddings and pornography as cultural performances reveal about our primary cultural concerns?

