Pornography and Accommodation

Richard Kimberly Heck

Department of Philosophy, Brown University

Abstract

In “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game”, Rae Langton and Caroline West borrow ideas from David Lewis to attempt to explain how pornography might subordinate and silence women. Pornography is supposed to express certain misogynistic claims implicitly, through presupposition, and to convey them indirectly, through accommodation. I argue that the appeal to accommodation cannot do the sort of work Langton and West want it to do: Their case rests upon an overly simplified model of that phenomenon. I argue further that, once we are clear about why Langton and West’s account fails, a different and more plausible account of pornography’s influence emerges.

According to Catharine A. MacKinnon (1993), pornography both subordinates and silences women. Precisely what that might mean is far from obvious, and some authors have argued that MacKinnon’s view is incoherent. In a series of now well-known papers, however, Rae Langton has developed an interpretation of MacKinnon’s claims that has struck many as promising: Pornography subordinates women by establishing such socio-political ‘facts’ as that women’s consent to sex is not required, and it silences women by establishing, for example, that a woman’s “No” is not always a refusal, at least in a sexual context.

It is as essential to Langton’s view as it is to MacKinnon’s that pornography establishes such ‘facts’, and not just in a causal sense: Pornography is supposed to “make[] women socially inferior” (L&W, p. 306, my emphasis) and to “make certain actions—refusal and protest—unspeakable for women in certain contexts” (Langton, 1993, p. 324, my emphasis). Liberal

1 I here use the term “pornography” in a morally and politically neutral way: as applying, roughly, to sexually explicit media that, in some sense, and to some significant extent, is intended to facilitate sexual arousal in those who engage with it. I doubt that any satisfying conceptual analysis is possible—but that only makes “pornography” like most other words.

2 References marked “L&W” are to Langton and West (1999).
‘defenders’ of pornography have often been willing to grant that (a lot of) pornography communicates and even spreads despicable attitudes. But they regard such consequences as lamentable effects of pornography’s regrettable success in the ‘marketplace of ideas’: somehow, it manages to convince its audience to adopt the views about gender and sexuality that it expresses (see e.g. Cohen, 1996; Strossen, 2000). Langton, by contrast, following MacKinnon, argues that pornography does not just express or assert such claims but performs a different sort of speech act that establishes the truth of what it expresses: like when an umpire says “Out!” or a judge says “I find the defendant guilty”. These are speech acts of the sort that J. L. Austin (1962, pp. 152–4) called ‘verdictives’.

As Langton (2012, pp. 82–3) would later concede, however, pornography does not seem to fit the classic Austinian model: “Its speakers do not officially, and authoritatively say, for example, ‘I hereby subordinate [women]’…”. There is thus a need for a supplement that explains how pornographic speech might “nonetheless work in ways that are comparable to classic Austinian illocutions”. Providing such a supplement is one central goal of the paper “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game”, which Langton wrote with Caroline West. Their proposal is that pornography works its black magic through what David Lewis (1979) called ‘accommodation’. According to Langton and West (L&W), the stories pornography tells presuppose certain ‘facts’ about gender and sexuality, such as that women enjoy being raped. It is not that such claims are asserted explicitly, any more than someone who says “I wonder whether Jean regrets voting for Smith” explicitly asserts that Jean voted for Smith. But the stories pornography tells, L&W claim, make little sense if one tries to interpret them against a background in which it is assumed instead that women do not enjoy being raped (L&W, p. 312). In ‘reading’ pornography, then, one is forced to take its presuppositions on board, to ‘accommodate’ them, as Lewis would have us say. Pornography thus expresses its misogynistic attitudes implicitly, through presupposition, and conveys them indirectly, through accommodation.

There is nothing in this account so far to which a liberal ‘defender’ of pornography need object. As was noted above, many of Langton’s opponents would agree that pornography expresses misogynistic attitudes about gender and sexuality and that it sometimes succeeds in instilling those attitudes in its audience. It is in response to such opponents that L&W attempt to show that certain features of presupposition and accommodation can help us to understand how pornography might, once again, “work in ways that are comparable to classic Austinian illocutions”
and make women socio-sexually inferior just by saying that they are (Langton, 2012, pp. 82–3).

In the paragraph before the one from which I just quoted, Langton seems to describe her goal more modestly: to show how “pornography might have the illocutionary force of altering norms and social conditions, by legitimating, or advocating, certain beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour” (Langton, 2012, p. 82). It is difficult to see, though, why Langton’s liberal opponents should need to disagree with that formulation: They agree that pornography alters norms and social conditions by affecting people’s beliefs and other attitudes; they very explicitly also think that it does so by advocating for those norms, etc. If there is a disagreement here, it is contained in the remark about pornography’s illocutionary force: Langton needs pornography to work like an Austinian performative, and the suggestion being made by L&W is that it does so through the mechanisms of presupposition and accommodation.

I will be arguing here that accommodation cannot do the work that L&W need it to do. The underlying difficulty is that they operate with a simplified model of presupposition that elides certain subtleties. In many settings, these do not matter, so many philosophical (and even linguistic) discussions operate with the same simplified model. In the present context, however, what the simplified model omits turns out to be crucial.

In section 1, we will review the notions of presupposition and accommodation. We will then briefly discuss, in section 2, just what L&W think pornography presupposes—and so is able to convey through accommodation. That done, we’ll consider, in section 3, some initial questions about the role L&W take accommodation to play, so as to bring that role into better focus. The core of the paper is section 4, which argues that it is far less clear than L&W suppose why pornography’s presuppositions should persist beyond the local context in which they are introduced. Section 5 considers the relation between L&W’s account and claims Langton makes elsewhere about pornography’s authority concerning matters of gender and sexuality. I’ll argue that Langton conflates two notions of authority and that, once they are disentangled, a different, and more plausible, model of how pornography might influence its viewers emerges.
1 Presupposition and Accommodation

The notion of presupposition that is relevant to this discussion is what Robert Stalnaker (1970) called pragmatic presupposition. Before Stalnaker, presupposition was typically regarded as a ‘logical’ relation between a sentence and a proposition. Thus, Sir Peter Strawson (1950) famously argued that the sentence “The King of France is bald” presupposes that France has a king; if France has no king, then, or so Strawson tells us, the sentence has no truth-value. Since one’s assertive utterances ought at least to be truth-evaluable, a sentence’s presuppositions came to be seen as ‘felicity conditions’ on its utterance: One ought not utter a sentence whose presuppositions are not satisfied.

Stalnaker, by contrast, argued that the more fundamental notion is what someone presupposes. It would be better, on his account, to say that a person who assertively utters “The King of France is bald” makes it manifest that they are presupposing that France has a king. And, in so far as this sentence has a ‘felicity condition’, it is not that France should have a king but rather that it should be mutually presupposed, among the parties to whatever conversation is under way, that France has a king. These mutual presuppositions constitute what would later come to be called the ‘common ground’ of the conversation (cf. Stalnaker, 2002).

It was realized in the early 1970s, however, that there are plenty of cases in which it is perfectly all right to utter a sentence even though its felicity conditions, in this sense, are not satisfied (Karttunen, 1974; Stalnaker, 1974). I might say to you, “I wonder whether Jean regrets voting for Smith”, knowing full well that you do not know for whom Jean voted. But now you do know: You assume that I am aware what my utterance presupposes; you can therefore infer that I am myself presupposing that Jean voted for Smith; and, not seeing any reason not to do so, you join me. As Lewis (1979, p. 339) puts it, “Say something that requires a missing presupposition, and straightaway that presupposition springs into existence…”, at least assuming that one’s conversational partners do not object. This is the process that Lewis called accommodation.

Lewis (1979, pp. 344ff) himself speaks of there being a rule of accommodation, which he suggests may be a constitutive rule that partially defines what conversation is, much as the rules of chess define what chess is. Stalnaker (2002, §§3–5), by contrast, argues that there is no such rule and that accommodation is the result of broadly Gricean principles concerning the co-operative nature of conversation, an idea developed in more detail by Mandy Simons (2003). Fortunately, we will
not need to decide this issue here. I mention it only to deflect, in advance, any objection based upon a conception of accommodation as a ‘rule’. It would surely be a mistake for L&W (or their sympathizers) to commit themselves to Lewis’s particular view on this matter, since the issue remains unresolved.3

2 What Does Pornography Presuppose?

Recall the sort of story L&W want to tell. Pornography makes certain presuppositions, so one simply cannot engage with it, as pornography at least,4 without accommodating those presuppositions. Mere engagement with pornography thus seems to require accepting its presuppositions. Moreover, “...the presuppositions introduced by the pornographic conversations persist in...conversations with real women” (L&W, p. 313), in particular, in sexual interactions that men who have viewed pornography have with women.5 That would not be a problem but for the nature of the presuppositions pornography allegedly makes, i.e., their being deeply misogynistic. Obviously, then, it is a crucial question exactly what pornography presupposes.

L&W make some very strong claims in this connection, namely, that pornography presupposes that “…‘Gang rape is enjoyable for men’, or ‘Gang rape is enjoyable for women’ or ‘Sexual violence is legitimate’...” (L&W, p. 312). These specific claims are made about a somewhat infamous pictorial, “Dirty Pool”, that was published in Hustler magazine in January 1983, though L&W insist that this pictorial “is in many ways typical” (L&W, p. 311, n. 20). But L&W’s interpretation of this particular pictorial might be questioned (Heck, 2018), even if it had not been borrowed from an anti-pornography slideshow produced by a political organization with a definite agenda.6

3 So far as I can see, though L&W (pp. 309–10) do tend to speak in such terms, they nowhere rely upon accommodation’s being a ‘rule’. But Mary Kate McGowan, whose work I will discuss in section 4, does seem to do so. See note 26 and the text to which it is attached.

4 The contrast is with, e.g., a researcher who is viewing a film so as to catalogue the sex acts performed in it, as opposed to someone who is viewing it so as to facilitate sexual arousal. I’ll usually omit this qualification henceforth.

5 Most of the philosophical literature on pornography concerns itself exclusively with heterosexual pornography and its effect upon heterosexual relations. That is regrettable, for a variety of reasons, but it is L&W’s exclusive concern, so I’ll focus on that case here.

6 L&W’s characterization of the pictorial comes from a paper by Catherine Itzin (1992, p. 30) who is simply quoting a presentation developed by the group Organizing Against
Still, there certainly have been pornographic films that, at least arguably, make the sorts of presuppositions L&W mention. One example is *Behind the Green Door*, which was directed by the Mitchell Brothers and released in 1972.\(^7\) Gloria (played by Marilyn Chambers) has been abducted and taken to some sort of sex club. As a mime warms up the crowd, Gloria is prepared for what is to happen to her. Six women lead her onto the stage, and an announcement is made to the audience:\(^8\)

> Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness the ravishment of a woman who has been abducted. A woman whose initial fear and anxiety has mellowed into curious expectation. Although at first her reactions may lead you to believe that she is being tortured, quite the contrary is true. For no harm will come to those being ravished. In the morning, she will be set free, unaware of anything except that she has been loved as never before. . . . So, with the knowledge that you are powerless to stop the performance, just relax and enjoy yourself to the fullest extent.

In fact, Gloria is still ‘reluctant’ when her ‘ravishment’ begins, but she is soon overcome by her own arousal and before long seems to be participating enthusiastically. Arguably, then, *Green Door* does presuppose the so-called rape myth: that women, even when initially ‘reluctant’ to engage in sexual activity, will sometimes enjoy themselves in the end.

Whether very much pornography makes such presuppositions is obviously an empirical question, however, and my own view is that hardly any does (Heck, 2018). But, for our purposes here, we can set the question aside. Although there is plenty of pornography nowadays that is, or so I would argue, not particularly sexist, it is also true that there is quite a lot of mainstream pornography that is sexist (to a greater or lesser degree), and I strongly suspect that such pornography helps perpetuate sexism (and, indeed, other forms of oppression). So it’s a nice question

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\(^{7}\) Damian Kerr (2012) has argued for a more progressive reading of *Green Door*, but I'll not interrogate the more common reading here.

\(^{8}\) My attention was drawn to *Green Door* by Linda Williams's discussion of it (Williams, 1989, pp. 156–60). As it happens, Williams does not get the announcement quite right. It is not easy to understand. I had to listen to it several times, and I'm still not sure I've got it right.
whether the notion of accommodation might help us understand how pornography effects harm, even if it turns out to do so in more subtle ways than by propagating the rape myth.

For the sake of argument, then, I'll assume henceforth that the sorts of presuppositions L&W claim to find in pornography—ones concerning the legitimacy of sexual coercion, for example—are indeed widespread.

3 How Much Accommodation?

There’s an obvious sort of worry about L&W’s analysis. As we’ll see, it’s one to which there is a reasonable response, but discussing this objection will help us better to understand the role that accommodation plays in L&W’s account. More importantly, doing so will help us to isolate what I take to be the crucial question about their account.

Suppose that Fred has never before watched pornography. One day, though, he decides to watch *Behind the Green Door* and so is forced to accommodate the film’s misogynistic presuppositions. A few days later, Fred watches *Joy*, a 1975 film that “begins with the rape of a high school virgin who... yells out at her attackers as they flee that she wants ‘more’...” (Williams, 1989, p. 165). The presuppositions this film makes look very much like the ones *Green Door* (allegedly) makes. If so, however, then those presuppositions are already in place, and Fred will not need to accommodate them.

Of course, this is just one example, but it generalizes, because the sorts of presuppositions (we’re assuming) that pornography makes have to be very general if they’re to be widespread, and they need to be widespread if pornography is to have the sorts of effects L&W claim it does. But then it’s unclear how large a role accommodation can really play: Once you’ve watched one film, you’ve already been forced to accommodate its presuppositions; you don’t need to accommodate them again when you watch the next one.

The obvious response is that we have overlooked the fact that, as L&W see it, misogynistic presuppositions are both “introduced and reinforced by pornography” (L&W, p. 314). They are *introduced* when Fred first watches *Green Door*. And it seems as if L&W can happily allow that it may take more than one film for Fred really to get the message that pornography is speaking. Eventually, though, Fred will get it. Once he’s

9 There is apparently a very different notion of accommodation, used in sociology and related fields, on which it can take a very long time for something to be accommodated.
got it, that doesn’t mean the message is no longer there, that is, that the presuppositions are no longer made. They are, though now they may not be so noticeable. It is at this stage, then, that pornography reinforces its misogynistic presuppositions, functioning more as a reminder than as a news flash: The presuppositions pornography makes just seem to fit with, and thus to confirm, what Fred already takes himself to know.

That said, it is far from obvious that pornography ever introduces these sorts of misogynistic presuppositions. Consider, for example, the myth that women sometimes enjoy sex they initially declined, which is very much bound up with the idea that women don’t always mean no by “No”. This belief is hardly part of an ideology that is special to, or that originated with, pornography. On the contrary, such attitudes are as widely presupposed in other forms of popular culture as they are in pornography, and they have been for a very long time (cf. Bauer, 2015, p. 78). The fact that Fred has never before watched a pornographic film therefore gives us no reason to suppose that he has not previously been exposed to, and maybe even already absorbed, the sorts of presuppositions made by misogynistic pornography. The point here is not just the familiar one that sexism pre-dates pornography. Rather, the point is that there is no easy path from claims about what pornography presupposes to the claim that those presuppositions ever need accommodating.

Depending upon one’s goals, this point may not matter very much. I do not deny that pornography can, and often does, reinforce certain misogynistic attitudes about gender and sexuality. Maybe much or most pornography does presuppose (even if it is not specially responsible for) such attitudes. If so, then exposure to it, as to other forms of media, might help to reinforce misogynistic attitudes simply by telling people what they already think they know, making the attitudes seem natural and obvious, an unremarkable part of the common ground. Maybe pornography is even especially suited to this task, its sexually explicit character making these attitudes seem to have a special urgency—though why sex-

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To be sure, L&W clearly have Lewis’s model in mind, and Lewis-style accommodation is supposed to be all but instantaneous. But it needs argument that they cannot be more flexible. (Thanks to Jason Stanley here.)

10 Margaret Jackson (1984) discusses the ubiquity of such myths in sex advice books, and even in sex research, in the early twentieth century. Going much further back, Anne Eaton (2012a) discusses the eroticization of rape in renaissance painting.

11 It is worth remembering that accommodation is, and was in fact introduced as, the exceptional case. Ordinarily, the presuppositions of one’s utterances are antecedently in place. The mistake was to assume that they always are.
ually explicit media should be a particularly effective messenger seems to be little discussed, either in philosophy or elsewhere.¹²

Even if all that were correct, however, it would not be sufficient for L&W’s purposes. Their view is that pornography does not just reinforce existing inequities but “in some sense makes women socially inferior, and makes sexual violence normal and legitimate” (L&W, p. 306, my emphasis). Pornographers are supposed to be able to establish socio-sexual norms by fiat, as if they were legislators with special responsibility for such matters, the Ministers for Gender and Sexuality. Now, to be sure, it is possible that, even though these norms would have been floating around in the culture anyway, they only become ‘established’ through pornography’s edict. But we need to be told how that is supposed to happen: how pornography makes women socially inferior. That is the question that L&W were trying to answer when they invited us to appeal to accommodation. The idea was that viewers are forced to adopt the sexist norms that pornography (allegedly) presupposes simply in virtue of their engaging with it as pornography. But the cultural ubiquity of these norms makes it unclear why pornography should have any special (or specially efficacious) role in getting viewers to adopt those norms.

There is, however, a slightly different way that pornography could help to maintain male supremacy, namely, by making certain misogynistic norms difficult to escape. Suppose that Fred has somehow managed to free himself from the sorts of rape myths allegedly propagated by pornography. One day, though, he foolishly decides to watch *Behind the Green Door*. In order to engage with the film (as pornography), Fred must accommodate its (allegedly) misogynistic presuppositions. The film would make no sense otherwise. So, one might suggest, such films inevitably

¹² Gail Dines frequently alludes to the special efficacy of sexually explicit media, for example, in this passage:

By the time they first encounter porn, most men have internalized the sexist ideology of our culture, and porn, rather than being an aberration, actually cements and consolidates their ideas about sexuality. And it does this in a way that gives them intense sexual pleasure. This framing of sexist ideology as sexy and hot gives porn a pass to deliver messages about women that in any other form would be seen as completely unacceptable.

(Dines, 2010, pp. 87–8)

But pornography does not present *sexist ideology* as “sexy and hot”, and the last sentence seems to contradict the first one. So it remains obscure why the messages that pornography delivers are supposed to be worse than those already embedded in the culture. (Note also that Dines is effectively denying that pornography’s presuppositions often need accommodating.)
pull their viewers into a world in which sexual violence is normal and legitimate. Must Fred, then, not come away from *Green Door* with his commitment to gender equality at least somewhat undermined?\(^{13}\)

### 4 The Persistence Problem

Summarizing their discussion of silencing, L&W write: “Our suggestion is that the presuppositions introduced by the pornographic conversations persist in. . . conversations with real women” (L&W, p. 313). We saw in the previous section that it is unclear to what extent pornography is responsible for introducing such presuppositions. In the present section, we’ll consider what, even when it does so, is required for those presuppositions to persist. L&W do address a version of this question, one that arises from the fact that pornography is often fictional, and we’ll consider those remarks in section 4.2. But the worry about persistence has deeper roots.

#### 4.1 Presupposition as Local

In many of his discussions of presupposition, Stalnaker operates with what he describes as a ‘simple model’ according to which the common ground consists of mutually held beliefs (Stalnaker, 1974, p. 49; 2002, p. 704): What I presuppose is what I believe we all believe.\(^ {14}\) But, in general, presuppositions are not beliefs (Stalnaker, 1974, p. 52; 2002, §5). The most common counter-examples are explicit suppositions. “Suppose Alex is a spy”, I might say, inviting you to reason with me under that supposition. Then, assuming you do join me, our conversation proceeds until further notice with the presupposition that Alex is a spy in place. Thus, it is now acceptable for you to say, “Then Sam must be a spy, too”. The word “too” is a so-called presupposition trigger: Use of that word, in this case, is felicitious only if it is presupposed that some other conversationally relevant person is a spy. That this utterance is felicitous shows that it really is being presupposed that Alex is a spy.

\(^ {13}\) Dines (2010, p. 98) claims, in a similar vein, that “…men cannot walk away from [pornographic] images unchanged”. The text preceding this remark makes it clear that what she really means is that pornography necessarily changes male viewers for the worse, even if it does not make them all rapists. But, beyond a handful of anecdotes from guilt-ridden men who have attended her lectures, Dines provides no evidence for such a speculative generalization.

\(^ {14}\) And what I believe we all believe we all believe, etc, so that the structure of presupposition has the familiar Gricean reflexivity.
Other sorts of cases reinforce this point. Imagine Tony says to you, “Jean doesn’t know that Alex is a spy”. Not yourself believing that Alex is a spy, you might challenge them. But you might just decide to play along, perhaps in an effort to learn more about Tony’s peculiar worldview. If you do, then the presupposition that Alex is a spy is once again in effect, this time through accommodation. The felicity of the question “Do you think Sam might be a spy, too?” makes this plain.

One-sided ‘conversations’ will frequently exhibit this sort of structure. Imagine reading, on a certain sort of website, “Some people have speculated that Michelle Obama was also born in Africa”. No one who is familiar with recent American politics would need to pause over the presupposition triggered by “also”. One knows exactly what is being presupposed (that Barack Obama was born in Africa), and one can easily accommodate that presupposition for the duration of the article. Of course, one can also refuse to do so, but, if the the author relies extensively upon this presupposition, that may make it difficult for one to make sense of what follows. In order to engage with the article, one has to play along.

The terms usually used in this connection are “accept” and its cognates (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 715). So, in the conversations described a couple paragraphs ago, we would be said to ‘accept’ that Alex is a spy. But our accepting it amounts to different things in different cases, and this technical notion of acceptance must be sharply distinguished from nearby notions. Acceptance, in this sense, is in no way a dilute form of belief. Supposition utterly lacks the ‘truth-directed’ character of belief, and what you ‘accept’ in the context of a particular conversation can even contradict what you actually believe, as two of the examples just given show.\(^{15}\)

There is another way in which presuppositions differ from beliefs, one that is even more important in the present context. One’s beliefs are (in general) independent of any conversation in which one may happen to be engaged. Presuppositions, by contrast, are (in general) local to a given conversation. The examples given above again illustrate this point: We are making a supposition, or playing along, only for the duration of a certain conversation. So, as one common formulation has it, one’s presuppositions at a given time are what one is prepared

\(^{15}\) In one place, Langton (2012, p. 84) acknowledges this point, but then dismisses its significance, writing: “. . . [B]asically, on Stalnaker’s approach the shared common ground is identified with certain belief-like propositional attitudes of the speakers. . . .”. It simply is not.
to take for granted for the purposes of the conversation in which one is engaged at that time (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 716). The italicized qualification is essential. I am not prepared, at any time, to take it for granted simpliciter that Alex is a spy. If I were, I would contact the relevant authorities.

The simplified model encourages neglect of such subtleties. If what’s presupposed is also believed, then presuppositions are not ‘local’. New beliefs acquired through accommodation just do persist after the current conversation ends, simply because they are new beliefs. But presuppositions are not always believed, and the case in which they are not believed is, as far as conversational dynamics are concerned, utterly unexceptional: The same mechanisms are at work when presuppositions are believed as are at work when they are not. That was a large part of Stalnaker’s point.

It is not, of course, as if no presuppositions are trans-conversational. Information gleaned through accommodation can and often will persist beyond the local context. That is what happens, for example, in the case mentioned earlier, in which I learn through accommodation for whom Jean voted. But, in general, we cannot just assume that presuppositions that are introduced through accommodation (or any other mechanism) will persist beyond the local conversation, even when the conversation is intended to be serious and factual rather than playful or counterfactual. In particular, even if pornography makes misogynistic presuppositions, that does not by itself imply, or even suggest, that its audience must believe those presuppositions in order to engage with it as pornography, let alone that they must believe them the next day.16

4.2 The Fictional Character of Pornography

As mentioned, L&W address a form of this worry in their discussion of the fictional character of much pornography.17 Fiction often proceeds

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16 Naomi Wieland (2007, pp. 443–5) raises a similar question, though in a very different context. She offers Langton the view that, in pornography, the meaning of the word “No” has actually changed: “No” literally means yes within pornography itself. There then arises the question how that change spreads to (some) real-life sexual contexts. Wieland does tell a story about this, on Langton’s behalf, but, as Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (2010, §3) argue in their reply, it has all kinds of problems.

17 Most pornography, I would argue, traffics not so much in fiction as in fantasy. The difference between these two notions, which L&W (pp. 306, 314) conflate, becomes crucial when the question is what pornography presupposes (Heck, 2018), but we can set the matter aside here.
against a ‘background’ of fact or, as L&W emphasize, of purported fact. A reader who successfully identifies such background ‘facts’ can then learn something about the real world (e.g., how the streets of London are laid out) or, potentially, mislearn falsehoods (e.g., that women are socio-sexually inferior).

There should be no doubt that this kind of thing can happen. But, in the present context, the observation raises at least as many questions as it answers. Do pornographers actually make the sorts of “authorial moves” required to make it evident to their readers that such ‘facts’ as that women enjoy rape are supposed to be part of the factual background (L&W, p. 316)? Probably it would be better to regard pornographers as what L&W call “background blurrers” who instead fail to make the sorts of “authorial moves which enable readers to distinguish background from mere fiction”. If so, then it will presumably be possible for some viewers to “mistake fiction for background, and learn what should not be learned” (L&W, p. 317).

But what reason is there to suppose that a significant number of viewers do regard pornography’s misogynistic presuppositions as part of the intended factual background?\textsuperscript{18} Even if some do, why should we suppose that they will be inclined to accept pornographers’ judgements as gospel?\textsuperscript{19} L&W mock the ‘liberal’ view that pornography aims to persuade its viewers of certain socio-sexual opinions, insisting that “Pornography is designed to generate, not conclusions, but orgasms” (L&W, p. 305). But it’s hard to see why that objection cannot be turned back against L&W themselves. People typically turn to pornography to

\textsuperscript{18} Note the shift here from questions about what is present in some item of pornographic media itself to one about how viewers respond to and interpret it. I discuss the importance of this re-orientation in more detail elsewhere (Heck, 2018).

\textsuperscript{19} Or, as Martin Barker (2014, p. 144) puts it:

If... the argument is that pornography... creates a fantasy world where women are always willing to perform extreme acts, leading to demands for the same from ‘real women’, then at least the following (arguable) steps are involved: the fantasy status of this world has to be invisible to the people who visit it; all the acts and scenarios in the porn world have to point and draw in one single direction, to add up to a ‘myth’; and the reasons for visiting and using the [pornographic] world have to be such that they will tend to ‘spill over’ into lived relationships.

My focus here is on the last claim, but, with Barker, I would reject the others, including a weakened version of the second, which, as stated, is much stronger than it needs to be. I discuss the other claims elsewhere (Heck, 2018).
facilitate sexual arousal,\textsuperscript{20} not to learn about the social status of women. So the question remains: What reason do we have to suppose that the presuppositions that pornography introduces into the local context are liable to persist beyond it?

At one point, L&W suggest that pornography’s power to “affect[] the score of the sexual language game” might rest, in part, on “the nature of presupposition itself, which—as we remarked earlier—is inherently more difficult to challenge than outright assertion” (L&W, p. 313). There is something to this thought, but L&W’s way of expressing it is at best misleading. What they had said earlier was:

\ldots [W]hen something is introduced as a presupposition it may be harder to challenge than something which is asserted outright. A speaker who introduces a proposition as a presupposition thereby suggests that it can be taken for granted: that it is widely known, a matter of shared belief among the participants in the conversation, which does not need to be asserted outright. \ldots A challenger faces the cost of contradicting not simply the speaker, but the general opinion. (L&W, pp. 309–10)

What L&W say in the first sentence is, as we shall see below, correct. But the claims that follow are false, at least if they are intended, as they clearly are, as general remarks about “the nature of presupposition”.

Consider the first example discussed above, in which you learn through accommodation that Jean voted for Smith. Your informant need not suppose that fact widely known; she may even know that it is not and choose to convey it implicitly for that very reason.\textsuperscript{21} Many of the other sorts of examples that commonly appear in the literature on accommodation can be used to make the same point, for example, utterances involving definite descriptions. If I say, “I can’t make the meeting because I have to take my cat to the vet”, that presupposes that I have a cat. If you didn’t already know that I have a cat, you will

\textsuperscript{20} As Jennifer Saul (2006a, p. 60, fn. 6) points out, pornography is not particularly effective, by itself, at producing orgasms. The point will not matter here, but it will matter a great deal when it comes time to think realistically about how people engage with pornography.

\textsuperscript{21} Stalnaker (1974, p. 201) already describes the abstract structure of such cases, though he does not give any specific examples. He wrongly supposes, however, that the speaker must be pretending that the presupposed material is already part of the common ground. It is part of what makes Lewis’s discussion important that he avoids that trap.
have to accommodate (unless you object). But the only sense in which I’m suggesting that it can be ‘taken for granted’ that I have a cat is the technical sense discussed above. I need not be suggesting that it is common knowledge that I have a cat.

What passes for ‘common knowledge’ typically is part of the common ground. We do normally presume that other speakers will know who the president of the United States is, what day it is, and so forth. But what's part of the common ground, in any given conversation, need not be widely known (or known at all). It needs, by definition, to be mutually accepted, but only among the participants to the present conversation; moreover, accommodated material only needs to be mutually accepted after it has been accommodated. So it is not true, even in quite ordinary cases, that what is presupposed is widely known.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which presuppositions are, in general, more difficult than assertions to challenge, namely, that challenging them requires redirecting the conversation.\(^{22}\) But that is all. It is not as if it is especially difficult to say, “Did Jean really vote for Smith?” or “I didn’t know you had a cat!”\(^{23}\) Nor is there anything conversationally inappropriate about such statements. It’s just that making either would amount to changing the subject, even if only briefly.

H. P. Grice (1989, p. 26) famously remarked that “...each participant recognizes in [a given conversation], to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction”. There are ways in which this ‘conversational direction’ seems to track the distinction between content that is asserted and content that is merely presupposed. Someone who says “I wonder whether Jean regrets voting for Smith” is, in effect, proposing to discuss Jean’s feelings about Smith’s performance since the election, not Jean’s voting record (or, for that matter, the reasons for the speaker’s curiosity). That is what is ‘not-at-issue’ in the speaker’s remark, to use the now current terminology.\(^{24}\) To question ‘not-at-issue’ content—such as merely presupposed content—is

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\(^{22}\) This is sometimes called ‘derailing’, but that term has acquired a derogatory sense nowadays that would be completely inappropriate to the phenomenon we are discussing here.\(^{23}\) Note how special features of this case affect it. People do normally know whether they have cats, so challenging the presupposition directly would involve an accusation of either serious confusion or lying.\(^{24}\) This term seems to have been made popular by Christopher Potts (2015), who reports that it is originally due to William Ladusaw.
thus to shift the conversation away from the direction suggested by one’s interlocutor.

It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that there may be social costs associated with challenging presupposed material. I doubt these are great enough to do the work L&W need to be done, but we need not pursue that question. It is irrelevant what is involved in openly challenging presupposed material. The question we have been discussing is what reason we have to believe that the presuppositions introduced by pornography persist beyond the local context. As we saw earlier, there is no requirement that one challenge presuppositions one does not oneself believe, even in cases where it is clear the speaker does believe them, and even when the speaker seemingly expects you to share their belief. One can just silently ‘accept’ those presuppositions for the duration of the conversation and discard them when it is over.25

This point applies all the more in the case of ‘one-sided’ conversations, such as viewing pornography. One can voice one’s rejection of a given presupposition to oneself, as it were, but there are no social costs to doing so. And, having done so, one can then simply accommodate the presupposition—accept it, in the technical sense—and proceed. Nothing in the ‘nature of presupposition’, then, will help us to understand how pornography propagates its presuppositions beyond the local context. The model to which L&W are appealing explicitly allows for presuppositions not to do so.

4.3 McGowan on Conversation Exercitives

In the next section, we’ll consider the suggestion that pornography’s ability to propagate its misogynistic presuppositions rests upon a certain sort of authority it allegedly has with regard to gender and sexuality. Before we do so, however, it is worth our considering an alternative that has been developed by Mary Kate McGowan. She agrees with L&W that pornography silences women by “enact[ing] permissibility conditions for the (heterosexual) sociosexual arena” (McGowan, 2003, p. 161), thereby

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25 It is sometimes claimed that at-issue content demands one’s cognitive attention, so one might be less attentive to not-at-issue content and therefore be inclined to accept it without reflection. That might be used to reinforce the suggestions to be made below about pornography’s epistemic authority. Insofar as there is such a phenomenon, however, it is surely sensitive to how plausible the presupposed content antecedently is: The presupposition that the earth is flat will not just be absorbed that way the presupposition that I have a cat. That takes us back to the sorts of worries discussed in section 3.
making certain conversational moves that women might wish to make infelicitous, e.g., that of sexual refusal. McGowan (2003, pp. 167–8) doubts, however, that pornographers have any special authority. She therefore sets out to argue that pornography might enact the relevant norms anyway.

McGowan (2003, p. 169) first claims that every “conversational contribution invoking a rule of accommodation changes the bounds of conversational permissibility”. The argument is brief:

Since rules of accommodation make the [conversational] score automatically adjust so that what actually happens counts as fair play, any conversational contribution that invokes a rule of accommodation thereby changes the score. Since what counts as fair play [e.g., felicitous assertion] depends on the score, changing the score changes the bounds of conversational permissibility. (McGowan, 2003, p. 173)

Since pornography works through accommodation, then, engaging with it must change what is conversationally permissible.

In fact, however, accommodation has nothing to do with it: Every utterance alters the conversational score, if only by entering into the common ground the presupposition that the utterance was made (Stalnaker, 2002, pp. 708–9). So every utterance alters the bounds of conversational permissibility. This need not trivialize McGowan’s view, since, as she puts it, “… we can be discriminating about exercitives by being discriminating about the permissibility facts enacted” (McGowan, 2003, p. 176). That is, McGowan can reasonably insist that what is problematic about pornography is not the mere fact that it enacts permissibility facts—all utterances do so—but what kinds of permissibility facts it enacts. But then it is hard to see that any real progress has been made: The problem, as seen from within this framework, was always to say what kinds of permissibility facts pornography is able to enact. More importantly, as we have seen, the only permissibility facts an utterance is guaranteed to affect are those concerning what moves are permissible in the particular conversation to which it is a contribution.

26 This claim seems to depend upon there really being a rule of accommodation. It also seems to ignore the fact that presuppositions can always be challenged, something McGowan (2009, p. 396) elsewhere dismisses as a “complication”. As we have seen, it is rather more than that.

27 In later work, McGowan (2009, pp. 394ff) recognizes this point and generalizes it even further, to any ‘move’ in a rule-governed activity.
It follows that McGowan is vulnerable to a form of the objection we have been discussing. In explaining how, on her view, pornography might silence women, McGowan offers the following example:

...[C]onsider a pornographic scenario where the woman says “No” but in which she is depicted as clearly communicating her sexual consent. This type of pornography...might, in some contexts, enact a norm such that saying “No” counts as an insincere refusal (and cannot count as a sincere one).

(McGowan, 2017, p. 55)

But even if we assume that pornography can ‘enact’ such a norm, why should we suppose that this norm should apply outside the pornographic scenario in question? It is no doubt possible that such norms should persist into real-world socio-sexual interactions, but anyone who wants to argue that they do is going to have to appeal to something besides the abstract structure of conversational dynamics.

4.4 Short-Term Accommodations

With all that in mind, let us return to the case of Fred, who has not previously subscribed to rape myths but is now watching *Behind the Green Door*. It may well be that Fred, in order to engage the film as pornography, must accommodate its presuppositions. In that sense, the film pulls Fred into a world in which sexual violence is legitimate. But even if Fred regards this as part of the film’s intended ‘background’, and even if he supposes that the creators of the film regard that background as fact, his own ability to make sense of the film does not depend upon his accepting its presuppositions in any sense other than the technical one. Nor need he accept those presuppositions for any longer than the duration of the film. Of course, he might. But there is nothing in the nature of presupposition, or of communication via accommodation, that will help us to understand why the film’s presuppositions persist beyond the context of viewing, if in some case they do.

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28 It seems to me that McGowan is insufficiently sensitive to the difference between pornography’s convincing its viewers that a woman’s “No” doesn’t always mean No and its making it the case that it doesn’t. Another worry is that it really isn’t clear what the problem is supposed to be if the woman has, indeed, “clearly communicat[ed] her sexual consent”. Consent need not be verbally expressed, and a verbal “No”, in the presence of a clear non-verbal “Yes”, might figure as part of a role-play and be experienced as erotic by both partners. This, however, leads us once again into questions about the nature of fantasy that I cannot pursue here (see Heck, 2018).
One might regard Fred’s willingness to accommodate such a presupposition as morally problematic. Whether it is will depend upon how exactly he is engaging with the film, an issue that is far too complex to discuss here. For now, I wish only to point out that it is perfectly possible for viewers to ‘go along’ with the sexist presuppositions made in some pornographic film without their being so much as tempted to project them beyond that context. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear people complain about the sexism inherent in much pornography, even while they are prepared to watch it. If only there were pornography that was different! But people put up with what they can get because they have reasons to want to engage with pornography, and they are either unaware of, or are for some reason unable to access, the sort of pornography that at least strives to offer an alternative to what is most readily available on the web.

5 Pornography and Authority

5.1 Two Types of Authority

Following MacKinnon, L&W assume that pornography has special authority concerning matters of gender and sexuality, and they indicate that their “conclusion about pornography’s power to subordinate and silence women requires th[is] premise about pornography’s authority” (L&W, p. 306). It’s a natural suggestion, therefore, that L&W might invoke pornography’s authority to explain how it propagates its misogynistic presuppositions beyond the context of viewing.

29 Related issues are discussed in aesthetics under the title “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance” (see e.g. Gendler, 2000). There are also very general issues in aesthetics about the relation between aesthetic and ethical value—often discussed under the label ‘immoralism’—that would also be worth considering in this connection (see e.g. Carroll, 1996; Eaton, 2012b).

30 The cultural invisibility of ‘ethical pornography’ is a problem in its own right, but not one I shall discuss further here—except to remark that one way to counteract the negative social effects of pornography as it currently exists is, at least arguably, to encourage and support queer and feminist pornography and the people making it (Eaton, 2007; French and Hamilton, 2018).

31 A student once remarked to me that, although she knew of such alternatives, they seemed to be available only if one was willing to pay for them. To which I could only respond, borrowing from Jiz Lee (2015), that ‘ethical porn starts when we pay for it’.

32 Langton (2012, p. 83) also describes McGowan’s view as differing from the one she and West develop precisely because it does not require pornographers to have any special authority.
Indeed, L&W seem to make something very much like this move in their discussion of the fictional character of pornography: “Where the background propositions in a fiction are partly false”, they write, “a reader expecting authorial reliability on background propositions may acquire false beliefs” (L&W, p. 316). So, the thought might be, pornography’s authoritative status with regard to gender and sexuality leads viewers to trust its pronouncements on those topics, and that leads them to take its misogynistic presuppositions on board not just while watching but more permanently.

It is much disputed whether pornography has any special authority (see e.g. Green, 1998; Langton, 1998; Wieland, 2007; Maitra and McGowan, 2010). But set that aside. There is a serious danger of equivocation here. The sort of authority that is important in the context of Langton’s analysis of subordination and silencing is supposed to be comparable to that of a judge or an umpire: someone who can, through a particular sort of speech act, make something so. A reader who is “expecting authorial reliability”, by contrast, is simply granting the author epistemic authority. As Louise Antony (2017, pp. 79ff) has emphasized, however, this is authority in entirely different sense.33

Langton (2017, p. 33) has recently acknowledged her prior neglect of this distinction, but then proceeds to argue that its two sides are closely enough connected for her purposes. Epistemic authority, she writes, “is usually a felicity condition for the issuing of authoritative statements of fact…(e.g., an umpire says ‘The ball is out’)”. But this example makes Antony’s point for her. As John McEnroe would be happy to tell you, an umpire’s incompetence, though it might eventually get them fired, is not incompatible with their having the authority to declare a ball out.34 Such statements are authoritative only in a legalistic sense: As far as further play is concerned, the ball was out, even if it clearly ought to have been called in. Something similar is true in the case of another example Langton (2017, p. 33) gives: Knowledge of medicine is typically required for a medical license, but it is the license, not the knowledge, that gives someone the authority to make it the case, just by saying so, that someone may be supplied with otherwise prohibited drugs.35 In

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33 I stumbled upon this point myself shortly before Antony’s paper was published. Nancy Bauer (2015, pp. 79–80) comes close to making this same charge.

34 One of the greatest tennis players in history, McEnroe was famous for arguing with the officials.

35 Langton does not say what sorts of verdictive or exercitive speech acts doctors (qua doctors) can perform, but this is the only one that seems plausible. It certainly isn’t the
particular, the legal implications of a doctor’s prescription do not depend upon the correctness of their diagnosis.\footnote{Langton gives another example that has a different problem:}

What Langton’s speech-act analysis of pornography requires is that pornographers should be like the members of the Middlesex Cricket Club, just with the power to decide the rules of the ‘sexual language game’ rather than those of cricket. That is the claim which, as I mentioned earlier, is much disputed. What I have been arguing, in effect, is that Langton has conflated that claim with a far more plausible one in the same vicinity: that (some) viewers of pornography think that pornographers are simply \textit{better informed} than they are about certain subjects. Indeed, not even that much is required. Perhaps what (many) viewers of pornography think is just that it conveys the unvarnished truth about sexuality, whatever the attitudes of its producers.\footnote{This formulation avoids the question, emphasized by Saul (2006b, pp. 242–3), who the agents are of the speech acts allegedly performed when pornography is viewed.} But that is a claim that L&W’s opponents can freely accept. Indeed, it is one they might want to emphasize.

Langton (2017, §2.4) spends a good deal of time arguing, with reference to a 2013 report from the UK Office of the Children’s Commissioner, that teenagers often look to pornography for information about sex—and that what they ‘learn’ is not always what one would have hoped. But, even if that is true,\footnote{A recent Canadian study found that increased exposure to pornography is correlated with \textit{better} knowledge of sexual anatomy and behavior (Hesse and Pedersen, 2017), though it is not clear whether there is any causal relationship. (Nor is that clear in the UK report.) And, as America’s experience with the report of the Meese Commission taught (see e.g. Vance, 1992), it is worth being skeptical about reports on pornography} it simply does not follow that “. . . pornography is in a real sense ‘the law’ for some . . .” (Langton, 2017, p. 35). The most we
can conclude is that many teenagers are inclined to take at face value what they see in pornography: to grant it a kind of epistemic authority concerning gender and sexuality that it may well not deserve.

Adolescents are often starved for information about sex. What they get at school, and very often at home (in contemporary English-speaking societies, at least), is not just laughably inadequate but is not even directed at the question to which they really want to know the answer: how one actually has sex with someone (else). What passes for sex education, when it is not just thinly veiled sex-shaming and fear-mongering, is often limited to elementary biology and personal safety (see e.g. Pound et al., 2016). Even what one might have regarded as basic anatomical information—e.g., the function of the clitoris—is often omitted, for fear that acknowledging that sex is pleasurable might send the wrong message.39 Moreover, it should hardly be news that adolescents (and even adults) sometimes fail to engage with media critically. So, even if we do not know exactly why, it would hardly be surprising if some viewers failed to appreciate that ‘porn sex’ is often very different from ‘real sex’ and so ‘learned’ unfortunate lessons.

I do not say that dismissively. On the contrary, I think we should take seriously the idea that pornography has a kind of epistemic authority about sexuality for some or even many viewers. Doing so might well allow us to explain some (though surely not all) of the harm that pornography does. Fully developing this proposal would require a separate paper. But it is worth our considering an example, if only by way of making it clearer what kind of explanation is on offer and what strategies it suggests for mitigating pornography’s harms.

5.2 Pornography and Anal Intercourse

Breanne Fahs and Jax Gonzalez have argued that women’s experience of receptive anal sex has much to teach us about the ways in which gender inequality affects women’s sexual lives. For one thing, it helps to make clear “the complicated relationships women have to consent—including slippages such as partial or halfhearted consent...” (Fahs commissioned by socially conservative governments, especially ones advertised as ‘rapid evidence assessments’ (see also Barker, 2014, pp. 143–4).

39 Maggie Jones (2018) reports that, in an otherwise progressive class on sexual education, one teacher's attempt to talk about the clitoris was cut off by another. She had “inched across a line in which anatomy rested on one side and female desire and pleasure on the other".
and Gonzalez, 2014, p. 514). Indeed, Fahs and Gonzalez often seem impatient with the question whether the women in their study consented to anal sex. Consent is a legal notion, whereas the questions Fahs and Gonzalez want to ask are in some more general sense ethical. Indeed, what most interest Fahs and Gonzalez are the harms women experience despite their consenting. But if there are such harms, and I think there clearly are, then understanding how pornography has affected women’s experience with anal sex may require us to ask more refined questions than whether pornography has somehow legitimized anal rape.

There has been a significant increase over the last couple decades in the number of heterosexual women who have attempted receptive anal intercourse (Herbenick et al., 2010, p. 256). There are probably several reasons why, but, as Fahs and Gonzalez (2014, pp. 511–2) note, it is not unreasonable to suppose that one of them is the frequency with which anal sex occurs in mainstream pornography. The sort of preparation that is typically required for anal intercourse is usually edited out, however. I am not sure I would want to say that it is often presupposed that no special preparation is required for anal sex. But it is nonetheless easy to see how someone who naïvely regarded pornography as, in relevant respects, an accurate presentation of what sex is ‘really like’ might come to believe that anal intercourse is every bit as easy and pleasurable for women as vaginal intercourse typically is, so that no special preparation is required. If so, then pornography may be at least somewhat responsible for the fact that many people try to engage in anal intercourse without appropriate lubrication, something that can be extremely painful for the receiving partner (Herbenick et al., 2011, p. 207). Indeed, one Croatian study found that almost half the women surveyed had to discontinue their first attempt at receptive anal intercourse because it was too painful (Štulhofer and Ajduković, 2011, p. 352).

\[\text{40} \text{ There is now a significant literature on this topic. See, e.g., Gavey, 2005; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007; Beres et al., 2014; Cahill, 2014; Thomas et al., 2017; Kukla, 2018. The issue burst onto the public scene in late 2017 with the publication of the short story “Cat Person” in The New Yorker (Roupenian, 2017) and then a much discussed article in babe just after the New Year (Way, 2018).} \]

\[\text{41} \text{ Fahs (2014, p. 282) misunderstands the question asked in the title of this paper: “Should We Take Anodyospareunia Seriously?” The question is not whether we should take seriously women’s experience of pain during receptive anal intercourse—that being what anodyospareunia is. The question is whether anodyospareunia should be regarded as a form of sexual dysfunction comparable to dyspareunia (that is, pain during vaginal intercourse). What makes that question important is its normative implications.} \]
Yet more worryingly, many of Fahs and Gonzalez’s subjects report having been prodded, pressured, or shamed into trying anal sex by partners who have come to regard it as “a normal part of heterosexual routines” (Fahs and Gonzalez, 2014, p. 511). The point here is not (just) that pornography has de-stigmatized anal intercourse. That in itself is not a bad thing. The thought, I take it, is that pornography may have re-shaped our shared social understanding of what heterosex generally involves and, thereby, the expectations and assumptions that people bring to sexual encounters. That, in turn, affects the boundaries of consent.

Suppose David and Susan have just met at a hotel bar and have retired to her room to have sex. Although each of them will have their own sexual tastes and proclivities, they will typically share an understanding of how their encounter might be expected to evolve: roughly, what sorts of things each of them expects the other to do or not to do. All of the activities in which they are about to engage will require consent, of course, but some of the activities in which they might engage would require special consent. For example, Susan might well expect that David would welcome it if she performed oral sex on him. For her to begin moving in that direction without explicitly asking would, I take it, be quite a normal thing for a woman to do, expecting that, as she does so, David will signal his interest or disinterest either bodily or verbally. But for David to move as if to slap Susan’s face, or to put his hands around her neck, or to start using degrading language towards her are different. These are things that some people enjoy, but they are not the sorts of things one can just do, assuming that one’s partner will speak up if that’s not what they want.

Similarly, changing orifices during intercourse is very different from changing angles, speeds, or positions: It is not something one can just do. A woman whose partner did so could reasonably claim to have been raped.

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42 I take it that this does not undermine the claim that these women consented, in a legal sense, though it well illustrates why Fahs and Gonzalez worry about an over-reliance upon the notion of consent as a tool of ethical analysis.

43 What I have in mind here is related to, but probably not quite the same as, what are known in the sociological literature as ‘sexual scripts’ (see e.g. Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Frith and Kitzinger, 2001).

44 I’ll leave it to the reader to continue the list. Suffice it to say that much contemporary pornography goes well beyond these limits (see e.g. Maddison, 2009). The issue, again, is not that such activities are necessarily objectionable, but that ‘special consent’ is needed for them, and pornography rarely portrays any such consent as having been given (see Blue, 2005).
One cannot even just make as if to initiate anal intercourse, figuring one’s partner will speak up if that’s not what they want. A woman whose partner did so could, it seems to me, reasonably object that he had not sought her consent in the way he should have; she might even suspect that he was attempting to manipulate her into doing something ‘in the moment’ to which she might not consent if she were explicitly asked.

Anal sex, then, requires ‘special consent’, but that is a contingent feature of our society’s understanding of heterosex. It is something that could change and that pornography could contribute to changing. Social norms and expectations supervene on individual attitudes, and, in our society, pornography probably does have a significant effect upon individual attitudes about sexuality. Indeed, there is some evidence that pornography has already done more than just de-stigmatize anal intercourse. Fahs and Gonzalez report that some of their subjects feel some cultural pressure to try anal sex due to their own sense that it has become something women are expected to do, and so that their (male) partners expect them to do it (see also McBride, 2019). They then observe:

The complex ways that the cultural context produces interest in anal sex (or the belief that most women engage in anal sex) seems evident in these narratives, as peers and pornography collide to create new norms about sexual behavior. (Fahs and Gonzalez, 2014, p. 512, emphasis original)

Once again, creating new socio-sexual norms is not, in itself, a bad thing. That is something feminists have been trying to do for a long time, and with some success (see e.g. Ehrenreich et al., 1986). The problem is that this particular change, though it affects women directly, has occurred without much input from women. It seems, rather, to have been the result of a discourse about sexuality that has largely excluded women’s perspectives, desires, and fantasies and that rarely foregrounds women’s sexual pleasure (or, more generally, sexual experience), except in cartoonish caricature.

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45 Fahs (2014, pp. 281–2) worries elsewhere that pornography has increased the pressure upon women to “conform to men’s desires” for certain sorts of sexual acts. I think what it has done is more to increase men’s desires for those acts. The problem this poses for women is arguably a result of independent gender inequities (cf. Segal, 1998, pp. 86–7).

46 That is one of the ways in which feminist pornography strives to be different, and one of the reasons that feminist pornography may actually be supportive of gender equality (Eaton, 2017).
It may well be, then, that pornography shapes individual and social attitudes about gender and sexuality in ways that are contrary to women’s interests. For example, pornography may be partly responsible for some heterosexual couples’ engaging in sexual interactions that are excruciatingly painful for the women involved. But, to explain how pornography has such effects, we do not need to treat pornographers as somehow akin to legislators or judges. Quite independently of pornography, women are socialized to cater to and defer to men, and men are socialized to expect women to do so. Such gendered power dynamics cannot but restrict and distort women’s (sexual) choices, even when they do not wholly deprive women of (sexual) autonomy, because they subordinate women’s (sexual) experience to men’s whims. If, to that toxic mix, we add bad information and unrealistic expectations about anal sex, as pornography arguably does, then the result is all too predictable.

But we still need to be careful how we assign blame. It is no doubt true that pornography doesn’t teach people that, if anal sex is to be pleasurable, then the receiving partner needs to learn to relax muscles over which they have no direct voluntary control (see e.g. Taormino, 2006, esp. Ch. 2). But it was always a stupid idea to leave sex education to pornography. Since that is what it has become, however, pornographers should accept the responsibility that the freedom they cherish brings with it.\[^{47}\] Still, it would be far less of a problem how pornography portrays sex if people didn’t respond so naïvely to that portrayal: regarding it as documentary evidence of what sex is ‘really like’ rather than as a (carefully edited) videographic portrayal of sexual fantasy.\[^{48}\] Comprehensive sex education that includes what has come to be called ‘porn literacy’—skills and strategies for critically engaging with pornographic media (see e.g. Tarrant, 2015; Lust and Dobner, 2017)—could do much to mitigate pornography’s harms. It wouldn’t hurt to include honest information about anal intercourse and other ‘non-normative’ sexual acts, either.\[^{49}\]

More generally, rather than (vainly) trying to discourage people from engaging with pornography, we could instead encourage them to en-

\[^{47}\] Some queer and feminist pornography eroticizes the preparation that is typically needed for anal sex. One example is Erika Lust’s “His Was First in My Ass”.

\[^{48}\] Or, if it is documentary evidence of something, then of the extraordinary abilities of highly trained sexual athletes (a comparison that has become almost a cliché).

\[^{49}\] As Štulhofer and Ajduković (2011, p. 347) sensibly put it: “The findings that a substantial proportion of women reported pain at first and subsequent anoreceptive intercourse highlight a need for more information and education about anal eroticism”.

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gage with it responsibly. But doing so requires us first to lift the shame that surrounds the ‘use’ of pornography—a dismissive term that I have scrupulously avoided—and to acknowledge, openly, that it actually is possible to engage with pornography in ways that are healthy and thought-ful, as well as pleasurable.\footnote{50}

\section*{References}


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