Both through its newfound prominence in mainstream popular culture, and by the sheer mass of material available to the consumer, the dictates of mainstream pornography on conceptions of gender and sexuality are at best highly visible and at worst deeply resonant within the cultural psyche. Using the force of the viscerally and psychologically affective medium of graphic sexual imagery, what I term "mainstream" pornography consistently maps binary gender roles to dominant and submissive power relations.

As part of the feminist debates on pornography, some have sought to vilify the medium of pornography for want of denouncing this pornographic norm, and others to protect the pornographic norm for want of defending the possibilities of the medium. Keeping this distinction in mind, I'd today like to look at ways in which alternative lesbian pornography makes reference to familiar pornographic memes from the mainstream, construing defiance of the norms as both erotic and political. The limited conception of sexuality and the static meaning of sexual acts within the mainstream are illuminated as the queering of these sexual acts twists our expectations about gender roles and sexual possibility.

In hyper-visualized sex, the physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of pleasure are necessarily flattened into forms that can be easily visualized and provide a quick turnover for arousal and climax. The hard-to-see internal factors of arousal must be mapped to visual signs, but in that transition, they easily become minimized and one-dimensional. Despite its enormous abundance, mainstream pornography seems consistently limited in depicting sexual possibility because it trades psychological complexity for an easily recognizable but static relation between gender roles, sexual acts, and desire with very little leeway for individual variance. The possible spaces for pleasurable psychological friction are condensed into a single plot line: men's sexuality means dominating women, and women's sexuality means providing that pleasure for men. Rigidly gendered bodies enact this plot line of female acquiescence to male dominance where body parts, body functions, and sexual acts are represented as static symbols mapping the masculine to positions of power and the female to positions of submission.

The most essential of these symbols to mainstream pornography is the act of penetration of feminized orifices by masculinized penises, fingers, tongues, and other objects. The self-reflexive signification of the penis and the act of penetration ties what is male to what is dominant. Bodily penetration must signify domination because men can penetrate and women can be penetrated. This relationship is normalized and essentialized, endlessly pounded into us as pornographic films run through a standard
rotation of oral, vaginal and anal penetration of women by men. What is ignored by mainstream porn is the variety of ways this relationship between dominance, maleness, and penetration can be queered.

Queer woman-only pornography is by no means isolated from the heterosexual mainstream because of the absence of men. The performativity of gender and power play in queer porn necessarily refers to the meaning of sex acts, body parts, and gender in mainstream pornography. Queer porn visualizes queer sex, but pornographic imagery necessarily evokes the context of those self-same sex acts and body parts portraying female sexual subservience and male domination in the mainstream.

In queer pornography, for instance, representations of penetration are ambiguous. In a female-only context, a phallus in the form of any variety of sex toys divorces penetration from anatomical maleness. If penetration is no longer a male act, does it still represent domination? We are faced with a necessary reconstrual of symbology here. While it can remain a symbol of possession, objectification, or punishment, the non-male phallus can become powerful and desirable because of the queered meaning of the taking and giving of pleasure through penetration.

In the hands of a solitary woman, phalluses in the form of dildos and the like are simply tools of self-pleasure. The phallus here can be read as completely disembodied, disconnecting the act of penetration from a necessary penetrator. A woman depicted masturbating by penetrating herself in a queer context is receiving pleasure not because she is fantasizing about a man penetrating her, but because she receives pleasure from penetration. What then is she fantasizing about? In mainstream porn, pleasure in penetration is necessarily linked to a man delivering that pleasure, and consequently, men are necessary agents for producing women's pleasure. In portraying penetrative masturbation with the absence of desire for penetration by men, female pleasure becomes situated as individual fantasy—penetration means pleasure, but not necessarily desire for male bodies or male domination. The psychological dimensions of sexuality begin to re-open here.

Portraying a woman wearing a strap-on receiving pleasure from penetration is likewise ambiguous. In what way precisely is she receiving pleasure? To what extent is this pleasure physical? What about the portrayal of fellatio on a strap-on? Here, we question whether sexual pleasure need be directly associated with physical sensation. Where is pleasure situated in an encounter with a strap-on? Is the woman wearing a strap-on taking pleasure in giving pleasure to the woman she penetrates? Force pleasure on her? Is the pleasure in the performance of masculine dominance we recognize from mainstream porn? Or in the queering of that masculinity?

Strap-on penetration can be read as an expression of dominance, but also as one of submission—at the expense of her own stimulation, the wearer is giving her partner pleasure. This in contrast to female pleasure being portrayed as something of a by product of male pleasure in heterosexual porn. Female pleasure, both physical and psychological, is represented by queer penetration as it toys with the symbols of
dominance and submission from mainstream porn, destabilizing the relationship between physical bodies, physical acts, and sexual pleasure.

Another chief symbol in mainstream pornography that is absent in queer porn is the cum shot. Mainstream porn is measured in units of male ejaculation, each instance serving as a token of the completion of a discrete act of sex; a proof of pleasure obtained and scene ended. Because the cum shot is the expected finale of any given scene, its absence in queer lesbian porn can be striking. What ends a lesbian scene can shift to a female orgasm in some cases, or a scene might involve multiple orgasms throughout with an ultimate climax being replaced by a drawn out "cooling down" where sex acts blur with acts of affection. The frequent lack of a clear climax in queer porn structures sexual encounters as a widely variable interaction between people rather than a predictable sequence of discrete acts man penetrating woman until he comes on her face.

Mainstream pornography normalizes the limitation of sexual possibility by enforcing a monotonous relationship between gender, sex, and power. Queer pornography replies to this static model by presenting the viewer with unexpected reversals and blendings of gender roles and sex acts. Gender and sexuality are realized as fluid, dynamic, and unlimited by static and anatomically-founded gender and power relations. The symbols and acts of domination and submission may remain, but they are no longer linked to biological sex, physical gender, or even gender roles. With this fluidity, sex happens between people instead of predictably gendered bodies. Arousal is repositioned as a primarily psychological interplay of gender expression, sex acts, and power play.

What is often provocative in queer pornography, then, is its self-consciousness in failing expectation: the erotic is situated in the spaces where sex scenes twist, alter, and remove elements essential to the formulas of the mainstream. Sometimes playful and campy, sometimes straight-faced, by deviating from the expected stories about erotic bodies, the mimicry of heteronormativity in queer porn couples an intent to arouse with a destabilization of the symbols necessary to the meaning of sex and gender in mainstream porn. There is titillation in this instability, and pleasure in the queering of the tired and static repetition of pornography. The use of the medium to illuminate the very fact of our expectations about what sex means and looks like is pornography as speech. Queer porn politicizes the erotic body by speaking about how little mainstream pornography has to say.

Pornography's power to be highly affective is clear by the vast discourse, feminist and otherwise, that it has evoked. To assume this power can only be negative, static, and one-dimensional is to deny pornography's ability to speak of sex in ways that are diverse, dynamic, healing, and radical.