

How to Teach in High Heels: Porn Studies in the Interdisciplinary Classroom

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Abstract

This essay traces the experiences of a literature instructor, with a background in queer theory and sexuality studies, teaching two sections of a small, multi-disciplinary, upper-division undergraduate porn studies seminar at a flagship, Hispanic-serving public university. After briefly exploring the ways that—as a literary comparatist—she failed to predict several practical challenges involved in actual interdisciplinary teaching, the author offers some provocations for teaching porn studies and navigating multiple student disciplines in a discussion-format seminar at a large state university with a diverse student body. The author argues that porn and sexuality studies are particularly useful tools in this institutional environment, as they enable organic interrogations of received ideas about race, class, gender, and sexual identity. After a lack of institutional support, the biggest challenge the author notes in her own initial relationship to interdisciplinary porn studies pedagogy is the training humanities scholars receive in “additive” versions of interdisciplinarity—which fail to question the basic primacy of one pedagogical model.

Keywords: porn studies, queer, feminist, race, literature, interdisciplinarity

Instructors in the humanities are used to adjusting our practices to accommodate a range of students, but we sometimes fail to prepare new faculty for the challenges of interdisciplinary teaching in underfunded university classrooms. In 2009, as a Comparative Literature Ph.D. in my first tenure-track faculty

position—at a large, Hispanic-serving R1 public university—I was asked to teach an older course at risk of being removed from the catalog. The class examined the history of pornography as a means of teaching feminist theory and film studies; it satisfied upper-division credit in five different disciplines (American Studies, Comparative Literature, English, Media Arts, and Women’s Studies), so it was cross-listed five ways. This was a common practice at my institution at the time: humanities and fine arts departments facing budget cuts relied on each other to offer elective courses. My own scholarship is predominantly in 19th-Century American literature, but I have a strong background in queer theory, feminisms, and sexuality studies. The chair of the course’s home department, Women’s Studies, assured me that I could make the class my own. “Sure,” I said, knowing that I’d been hired in part because I could wear several pedagogical hats. “Sounds interesting.”

The original course title, “Women and Cultural Violence,” was one clue that it had traditionally been taught from an anti-porn perspective. I planned a quite different approach; I wanted students registering for the class to understand that we would talk about more than women, and that we would question narratives about pornography as synonymous with victimization. Yet after initial enthusiasm when I agreed to teach the class, my supervisors resisted my attempts to change its title. Negotiations with the Women’s Studies Program’s director led to a compromise: I renamed the class “The Politics of Pornography.” This experience served as an early introduction to some of the issues involved in teaching porn studies in my new environment. Although hardly a new field, even in 2009, porn studies had never before been taught at my university.

The class was capped at 35 students, with between two and eight seats reserved for majors from each of the cross-listing programs. Because of the cross-listing system, students registered for the class through their own departments: for each of them, s/he was simply taking another elective course in his/ her major. I ended up offering the class twice, and each time I planned the first two weeks of the reading syllabus in part to inspire less-serious students to drop. As I was to discover, this was one of the few challenges that I’d been able to predict correctly.

Confronting Additive Interdisciplinarity

My pedagogical training and experience had not prepared me for the realities of teaching students from five distinct disciplines in one course. Humanities departments often talk about interdisciplinary teaching, but the on-the-ground experience requires a form of radical self-questioning that is missing from our

conversations about classroom method. My approaches to framing a discussion, my ideas about what mattered in each text or viewed image, and my assumptions about classroom dynamics reflected an additive model of interdisciplinary pedagogy that effectively forces other world-views to conform to the specifics of literary studies. I planned to critically examine with my students contemporary ideations of sexuality, race, and class: in order to model that approach effectively, I discovered that I needed to interrogate my own assumptions.

For the first version of the “Politics of Pornography” class, I ordered an anthology that predominantly covers a range of feminist and literary theoretical responses, Drucilla Cornell’s edited volume *Feminism & Pornography*. Once I’d supplemented this main text with cheap editions of Sade and Foucault, I filled in what I then saw as the gaps in my reading syllabus by uploading a few good articles examining the history of porn and some queer theoretical analyses. By the third week of class I realized that although Cornell was relevant to my Women’s Studies and English majors, in choosing texts and topics I’d failed to consider other issues that were important in my interdisciplinary classroom. I assigned extensively, in both sections, from Linda Williams’s *Porn Studies*, but eventually I concluded that no single edited collection fulfills the needs of an interdisciplinary classroom, as each is designed for one or two student audiences. Early in the first version of the course, I found it useful—just for myself—to write down a series of questions that seemed to lurk behind student comments (What is the difference between art and porn? Who makes porn and who makes art? Is what is considered pornographic universal, or is it culturally specific? Do ideas about morality reflect assumptions about race, class, and so on?). I found additional short essays that would help students understand how to frame these questions, and revised the syllabus accordingly.

Interdisciplinary pedagogy requires close attention to the quite different ways that students have been trained. My film studies students usually did not need my guidance (“Look at her shadow, or the way he’s holding his leg”) to have sufficient critical distance from pornographic images. Other students did. After realizing I was boring some students and talking over the heads of others, I spent as little time as possible doing this work for them, and counted on the Media Arts majors to help teach their classmates in this regard. Spending time both in- and outside of class questioning my own disciplinary blind spots helped me learn to approach those of my students more productively. As a feminist Ph.D. trained during the “post-wave” period, I needed to respect the fact that some of my Women’s Studies students considered pornography synonymous with rape—a few had taken classes with a retired colleague who had taught the earlier, anti-porn

incarnation of the course. At the same time, I also had to challenge them to explore the limitations and unspoken foundations of that premise.

A Regional Model of Diversity

Like my university, my classes were diverse in ways that did not conform to my East Coast expectations: although in the limited terms of the U.S. Census nearly half of the students in each class identified as Chican@ or Native American, they had complex and regionally-specific relationships to their own backgrounds. Several students, from the northern part of the state, considered themselves to be “Spanish.” This usage was a marker of ethnic pride, indicating centuries of ancestral residency in the state—the opposing identity term was “Anglo.” Their self-identification had nothing to do with internalized racism, as I was to learn: calling oneself “Spanish” was very different here than it might be for a Latin@ from New York or Los Angeles. The unique history of the region’s waves of Spanish and Anglo-American colonization, and ideas about sexual morality inherited from Roman Catholicism, were bigger forces in my class on 20th-Century and contemporary pornographic film than I’d understood ahead of time. I needed to learn the history of the place where I was teaching, more so than I would have, perhaps, if teaching a more conventional literature course. Literary depictions cannot challenge students’ senses of selfhood and identity as much as do the visual enactments of contemporary fantasies of race, class, and gender that are standard in porn. My Chican@ and Native American students responded to racialized sexual expectations in ways that reflected their own unique cultural and regional inheritances. They reacted in sophisticated ways to pornographic versions of that history—“cowboy and Indian” or “feisty Latina” imagery, for example, inspired productive critical analysis. I remember one student spontaneously connecting the characterization of a “Mexican laborer” in a gay porn clip with *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966); both representations, he suggested, traced back to emasculating depictions of Mexican men from the early twentieth century. I found no porn studies-specific readings of representations of Chican@s, but by 2011 I could use a couple of relevant articles from a recently-published film studies anthology on Latsploitation (Ruétalo & Tierney, 2009) to supplement my students’ own critical analyses.

However, when it came to the sexualized racialization of African American or Asian bodies in porn, both groups of students consistently failed to recognize stereotypes as such. I showed a short clip from the blaxploitation film *Mandingo* (1975) in preparation for a reading of Kobena Mercer’s analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Black Book*; to my surprise, only one Media Arts major had even

heard of the film. The class could generate only vague notions of the long history of dehumanizing clichés about African American male virility that Mapplethorpe, Mercer, and the movie itself all channel. In this case, the lack of scholarship on sexualized racialization in porn became a real hardship: although I assigned Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Nguyen Tan Hoang, even in 2011 there were few satisfactory analyses of pornographic depictions of African American women. This seems to be changing, gradually. Both Mireille Miller-Young and Jennifer Nash have since published books on the subject; Shimizu and Miller-Young are contributing co-editors, with Tristan Taormino and Constance Penley, of the excellent interdisciplinary volume *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (2013). In each of my classes, I learned to expect simultaneously advanced and depressingly basic levels of analysis about race, and to fill in background myself when necessary. At the same time, I had to allow my students to explore the complexities of their own responses to “other” racialized bodies in pornography, in sometimes ham-fisted ways, without passing judgment.

In a recent report, the Office for Diversity at my university concluded that queer undergraduates feel more alienated on campus than any other group in the student body, excepting the school’s small population of African Americans. My own scholarly background, the course description’s references to queer studies, and the fact that it was advertised by the college’s brand-new LGBTQ Resource Center, meant that I had a sizable minority of queer students in both iterations of the class—several expressed that they felt this was the first course they’d taken that was “for them.” In addition to exploring race in basic ways that I might not have expected in an advanced undergraduate course, I needed to make time for queer (as well as fat and disability) politics. Our moments of bracketed “consciousness raising” would have seemed a bit out-of-place in a literature course, but they seemed necessary in this campus climate.

Some of my straight-identified students were visibly dismayed upon discovering early in the semester that they would be discussing and watching gay and trans* porn, as well as porn featuring what I described in detail, early in the semester, as “non-normative” bodies. Two weeks into my first section of the class, after an unwelcome moment when one student repeatedly inquired about another’s sexual identity, I handed out a written set of rules: our discussion of porn was “sex positive”; even the slightest expression of disgust in response to an image or idea would earn automatic expulsion from that day’s class session; comments about other students, their sexualities or practices, were not allowed; anyone could leave the room for any reason as long as s/he returned after a reasonable interval. My only revision to this set of rules, in preparing the syllabus for the 2011 course, was

a statement to the effect that anything said in class was confidential. In my more traditional upper-division literature courses I resist proactive policing of in-class responses; in this course, setting clear ground rules was essential to ensuring a scholarly and safe environment. Interestingly, other than an occasional verbal reminder if someone risked veering into judgmental territory (“Remember, it’s okay to notice but not to police gender identity”), once I’d established these rules I never had to reassert them.

One of the most useful elements of both classes was that students occasionally chose to reveal their own backgrounds as sex workers. Reflecting the realities of living in a largely rural state with limited employment opportunities, most of these experiences were in phone sex operation, which enables anonymous access to national networks from home on a flexible schedule. In-class accounts provided concrete opportunities for examining questions of environment and sexual expectations. Again, however, I had to adjust my methods: these sorts of discussions generally don’t come up in literature courses. In response to one discussion, I decided to screen *Phone Sex Grandma* (2006) in class—my students found the short film both funny and deeply disconcerting—which enabled us to talk about ageism and rural life as well as the performative elements of sex work. Eventually, I concluded that “self-outing,” when students trust that their revelations are neither required nor unwelcome, provides an important means of concretizing abstract ideas.

When first designing the course, my greatest single anxiety was that I, or my students, would feel sexualized in the classroom. As a queer feminist and a survivor of sexual violence, and as a younger cisgender woman with long hair and a professional wardrobe largely made up of skirts and high-heeled shoes, I could imagine watching brief clips from early-20th-century pornographic shorts with my students—but I felt uncomfortable at the idea of showing them contemporary American mainstream commercial porn designed for a heterosexual male audience. As I learned, I’d underestimated them: once they understood my expectations, students were careful to refer to each other and filmic images appropriately. I myself only once, and in a very minor way, felt sexualized by a student. His horrified facial expression, as he realized that he’d referenced the lesbian porn film *How to Fuck in High Heels* (2000) before glancing down at the pair I happened to be wearing that day, immediately mitigated any sense of crossed boundaries; after a brief pause, I decided to move on without comment. Once I had truly self-authorized in this new and personally challenging topic, and then communicated that authority comfortably to the class with the full assumption that it would be respected, it was.

Changing classroom layout is one way to address these concerns. In 2009, the class met in a small room in which the instructor stood at the center of a circle of student seats. I did not actually screen any films in class that semester. Instead, I arranged for discounts on tickets for two showings of their choice at a local queer-affirming, body-positive porn festival. This was a start, but our discussions remained largely abstract because my students did not have images directly in front of them. In 2011, in a less-centralized classroom, I showed short clips at least once a week. My department reimbursed me for month-long subscriptions to a few websites—“Broke Straight Boys” still miss me, or so I hear—that enabled a diversity of perspectives (trans*, fat-positive, BDSM, etc.) as well as discussion of the particular politics of the web. In addition, we viewed full versions of canonical films. Before watching *Deep Throat* (1972), we read an anti-porn response to Linda Lovelace’s account of the movie’s production. Including actual porn in class, exploring political or personal discomfort, and recognizing that issues of classroom layout were more important for my own sense of ease in this case than usual were simple changes that helped ensure a more effective course.

Beyond the fact that I learned a new field alongside my students, the experience of non-mastery—of needing to approach my students’ disciplines as a fellow learner—has taught me to take productive risks in my other courses. Working with these two wonderful groups of undergraduates on this subject matter helped me concretely to understand the classroom politics of textuality, visuality, race, sexuality, class and gender as I never had before. That said, further cutbacks and an administrative crackdown on the budgeting loophole of the cross-listing system at my university has made multi-disciplinary teaching nearly impossible, instead of just challenging. In faculty meetings, my colleagues and I learn about various new initiatives, all geared towards making humanities departments conform to corporate models of marketability. I have worked towards tenure during a period in which my home department faces retirements that will not be replaced with new hires; consequently, my schedule is filled with required survey courses. These structural roadblocks are compounded by the long-standing difficulties that programs in queer, feminist, and sexuality studies face in underfunded environments: the first classes to disappear always are those taught by “interdisciplinary” departments, which also just happen to be committed to exploring non-normative, minority expressions of sexuality and other forms of identity. Yet I continue to hear and read about “interdisciplinary teaching” in English-specific discussions—from this, I could conclude that my profession is engaging in a collective form of false consciousness, but I’d rather think that many of us truly want to teach our classes differently. I remind my colleagues of the measurable ways that a confrontation with sexuality and porn studies in a diverse,

multi-disciplinary classroom is particularly productive for our students, serving as an active counter to increasingly corporate models of public higher education and the sorts of learning they mandate (see also Noble). The intellectual, political, and personal tools my students and I gained working together in 2009 and 2011 represent the kind of paradigm-shifting understanding that deserves sustained institutional and departmental support, not just lip service.

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