
16. LIFE IN THE FISH BOWL

Feminist Interrogations of Webcamming

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"[A]ll women live in sexual objectification the way that fish live in water."

I. INTRODUCTION

Inspired by, among other things, a coffee pot² and a fishbowl,³ on April 14, 1996, Jennifer Ringley launched Jennicam. In a self-described "social experiment,"⁴ whose diverse objectives included connecting with family and friends and challenging mainstream media images of women with "perfect hair and perfect friends,"⁵ regularly refreshed still images of Ringley's home were uploaded to

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1. Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 149-150.

2. Peter S. Goodman, "Famous British Coffee Pot Webcam to go Dark," *The Ottawa Citizen*, B10, April 9, 2001, <http://www.proquest.com>.

3. Eric Meyer, *The Amazing Netscape Fish Cam* (2003), <http://wp.netscape.com/fishcam>.

4. Theresa M. Senft, "Camgirls: Webcams, Live Journals and the Personal as Political in the Age of the Global Brand" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University Department of Performance Studies, 2005), 198.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

the web, where they were accessible (at least for some time) to anyone with an Internet-connected computer. Jennicam depicted everything from Ringley's empty couch to her cat to her working at her computer to her having sex with her boyfriend. It inspired considerable commentary and analysis, including among feminists struggling to understand the depth, breadth, meaning, and potential of voluntary personal exposure in this brave new networked world.

Jennicam is considered by many to represent the first of a growing number of "webcam girls" who are estimated by some to number in the hundreds of thousands.⁶ Many of these "webcam girls" are young women determined to harness the power of new communication technologies, such as the Internet, in efforts to oppose socially imposed mainstream definitions of gender and sexuality.⁷ They do so within the broader context of a societal turn toward exposure, micro-celebrity and "reality" television, and toward a contemporary flouting of the perceived puritanism of prior feminisms, feminisms that some have argued unnecessarily shamed women in relation to their sexuality and denied them the ability to explore and assert their sexuality as a form of social empowerment.⁸ Directly raising long-standing unresolved tensions about identity, privacy, sexuality, and pornography, Jennicam and its ensuing iterations invite further debate and analysis within the feminist community. In this chapter, I will pursue these themes in three parts.

First, I will discuss the evolution of the Jennicam experiment with a focus on Ringley's own description of her project. Second, I will draw out the interlocking themes of identity, privacy, and pornography resonating within Anita Allen's 2000 analysis of various webcam experiments by women. Third, I will highlight some of the ways in which Allen's analysis both raises and invites further exploration of these historically contested themes in feminist work. In conclusion I suggest that technological moments such as these offer feminists fresh space for dialogue on these issues and for an interrogation of the continuing relevance of prior positions taken in relation to them. While remaining open to the idea that past insights may no longer carry the resonance that they once seemed to, we ought not to foreclose the possibility that aspects of them may continue to be relevant to the ongoing struggle for a lived social equality for women.

6. Solid numbers with respect to webcammers and webcam girls, in particular, are difficult to obtain. Estimates in the hundreds of thousands have been reflected both in print and television productions on the topic: Julie Szego, "Saturday Extra—Camgirls," *The Age*, February 1, 2003, <http://www.factiva.com/>; "Watch Me Generation," TV Documentary, *Canada AM*, January 3, 2003, <http://www.factiva.com/>.

7. For some examples of these efforts, see *Webcam Girls*, DVD (Vancouver: Producers on Davie Pictures Inc., 2004).

8. For views questioning the empowering nature of these efforts, see Shoshana Magnet, "Feminist sexualities, race and the internet: an investigation of suicidegirls.com" *New Media & Society* 9 (2007): 577; Ariel Levy, "Female Chauvinist Pigs" in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005); *Webcam Girls*, (n. 7).

II. EVOLUTION OF THE JENNICAM

Born on August 10, 1976, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Jennifer Kay Ringley eventually went on to: skip her senior year of high school; score 1400 on her SATs; study economics and web design at Pennsylvania's Dickinson College; and work in web design and for a nonprofit social agency.⁹ In 1996, intrigued by Netscape's FishCam¹⁰ but convinced that watching people would be more interesting than watching fish,¹¹ Ringley conceived of the Jennicam—"a window into a virtual human zoo."¹² As for issues of privacy, Ringley's initial instincts were that "all the secrecy regarding what goes on 'behind closed doors' is doing more harm than good."¹³

In addition to the still images generated by the webcam set up in her home, the home page for www.jennicam.org featured options such as the "name that curve contest," email, photo galleries, journals, FAQs, and technological assistance.¹⁴ Although she could have opted for a technology that would have allowed her to watch her watchers, Ringley rejected that option, a decision quite consistent with her perception of privacy:

I don't feel like I'm giving up my privacy. Just because other people can see me doesn't mean it affects me. I'm still alone in my room, no matter what.¹⁵

Although she claimed that her webcam depicted her "life, exactly as it would be whether or not there were cameras watching,"¹⁶ early in the life of Jennicam, Ringley would occasionally stage performances in garter belts and high heels.¹⁷ She also reported spending hours responding to commonly asked questions in the FAQ section of her website as well as reading and answering some of the

9. Jennifer Ringley, interview by Ira Glass, *This American Life*, Chicago Public Radio, June 6, 1997, *This American Life Episode Archive*, http://www.thislife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=721.

10. FishCam features live shots of fish in an aquarium. It has been operating both before and after the Jennicam: Meyer, *Fish Cam*, (n. 3).

11. Jennifer Ringley, "Look@Me!!!" *The Australian*, February 21, 1998, <http://www.factiva.com/>.

12. *Reuters*, "Voyeur Website Jennicam to Go Dark," *CNN.com*, December 10, 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/TECH/internet/12/10/jenni.cam.reut/>.

13. Jennifer Ringley, "LOOK@ME," *The Australian*, January 24, 1998, <http://www.factiva.com/>.

14. Kristine Blair and Pamela Takayoshi, "Introduction: Mapping the Terrain of Feminist Cyberscapes" in *Feminist Cyberscapes: Mapping Gendered Academic Spaces*, ed. Kristine Blair and Pamela Takayoshi (Stamford: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999), 7.

15. Victor Burgin, "Jenni's Room: Exhibitionism and Solitude," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2000): 78, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

16. *Reuters*, "Voyeur website" (n. 12).

17. Blair and Takayoshi, "Feminist Cyberspaces," 8 (n. 14).

hundreds of emails she received from viewers on a daily basis.¹⁸ Nonetheless, in her mind, she maintained all the privacy she needed:

[V]iewers can't phone me, fax me, they can't keep me from mercilessly oversleeping. And until someone invents a plug-in that allows you to hear another person's thoughts via the web, I've got the most important privacy of all.¹⁹

[A]s long as what goes on in my head is still private, I have all the space I need.²⁰

Rejecting the idea that showing nudity automatically meant that her site was pornographic, Ringley argued that she "wasn't anywhere close to crossing the line," at least in terms of her own intentions.²¹

Ringley came to believe that her site offered a counter-point to beauty myths perpetuated in mainstream Hollywood media. "Enough with perfect, airbrushed models and starlets who refuse to be photographed eating because it is 'unbecoming,'"²² Ringley declared, "real people are just as interesting and appealing as the people the media tells us we should like."²³ Representations of "real" people, she argued could be affirming for those whose bodies and images did not fit the Hollywood mould, noting that a sixteen-year-old girl had thanked her for demonstrating comfort with having a "fuller body."²⁴

In 1997, with Ringley's cost of bandwidth escalating due to her site's increasing popularity,²⁵ Jennicam moved to a two-tier system of paying and nonpaying members. For an annual fee of \$15, paying members were able to upload images every two minutes, while nonpaying members received images every twenty minutes.²⁶ On occasion, Ringley appeared contrite about her move toward commercialization.²⁷

18. Ringley stated that men sent virtually all of the daily 700 emails she received in 1996. Though many requested private pictures, Ringley interpreted only one to be sufficiently threatening to close down her website for several days: Jennifer Ringley, interview by Ira Glass, (n. 9).

19. Ringley, "LOOK@ME," (n. 11).

20. Jennifer Ringley, "Frequently Asked Questions," *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, January 24, 1998, <http://web.archive.org/web/19990420213308/www.jennicam.org/faq/general.html>.

21. Ringley, "LOOK@ME," (n. 11).

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Jennifer Ringley, "Why I Star in My Own Truman Show," *Cosmopolitan* 25 (1998): 76.

25. Senft, "Camgirls," 229 (n. 4).

26. Krissi M. Jimrogrou, "A Camera with a View: JenniCAM, visual representation, and cyborg subjectivity," *Information, Communication & Society* 2, no. 4 (1999): 440, <http://www.EBSCOhost.com>.

27. Burgin, "Jenni's Room," 78 (n. 15).

In 1998, after moving to Washington, D.C., Ringley increased the number of cameras in her residence and changed her operating system to be “much faster and more reliable than the old method [she] was using. And more secure.”²⁸ Between 1998 and 2003, Ringley made a number of aesthetic and content changes to her website. In 1998 she added a copyright notice, later followed by the addition of a trademark.²⁹ In 1999 she uploaded professional photographs of herself, including some in which she posed semi-nude.³⁰ Later that year, she added a definition on her home page:

JenniCam:

1. A real-time look into the real-life of a young woman. 2: An undramatic photographic diary for public viewing especially via the Internet.³¹

For several days in 2000, her home page was modified to show a picture of her behind the camera—an image that reappeared on her site from 2001 onward.³² By 2003, in keeping with an escalating air of commercialization, the website featured advertising and a detailed layout of the cameras located in her California home.³³

Later in 2003, Ringley shut down JenniCam. Some have speculated that the shutdown resulted from PayPal’s cancellation of her account due to its concerns about online nudity on her site.³⁴ The experience of other women involved in 24/7 webcamming would suggest that Ringley’s decision could simply reflect the fatigue associated with maintaining the homecamming system and consistently being in front of the camera.³⁵

28. Ringley, “Frequently Asked Questions,” (n. 20).

29. Jennifer Ringley, *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, December 2, 1998, <http://web.archive.org/web/19981202112602/http://jennicam.org/>; Jennifer Ringley, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, April 18, 1999, <http://web.archive.org/web/19990418100201/http://www.jennicam.org/>.

30. Jennifer Ringley, “Jennifer’s Picture Album,” *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, January 25, 1999, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991013001942/jennicam.org/~jenni/pics/picsmain.html>.

31. Jennifer Ringley, *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, October 12, 1999, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991012055007/http://jennicam.org/>.

32. Jennifer Ringley, “JenniCam Command Central,” *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, October 18, 2000, <http://web.archive.org/web/20001018022108/http://jennicam.org/>.

33. Jennifer Ringley, “The Set,” *JenniCam*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, January 29, 2003, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030129010133/http://jennicam.org/>.

34. Peter Howell, “Without a Net: Jenni’s Public Life Unplugged,” *The Toronto Star*, December 14, 2003, D1, <http://www.proquest.com>.

35. For a sense of the significant amount of work and expense associated with maintaining a webcam, see discussions by Ducky Doolittle and Ana Voog in *Webcam Girls* (n. 7).

Jennifer Ringley, the embodied person, seems now to have very successfully slipped into the obscurity of an unwebcammed existence.³⁶ Tellingly—or perhaps only interestingly—Ringley maintained that she was neither a feminist nor engaged in a feminist project.³⁷ Nonetheless, the digital vestiges left by her experiment along with the era of voluntary personal disclosure-cum-exposure³⁸ that her project foreshadowed have reawakened controversial issues within feminisms.

III. ALLEN'S ANALYSIS: CYBERSPACE AND SELF-INVASION

Many authors, including those who identify as feminists³⁹ and those who do not, have analyzed Jennicam.⁴⁰ I have chosen to focus on self-identified feminist analysis in order to exploit an opportunity to work through issues such as identity, privacy, and pornography, which have long been contested subjects among those working toward the common goal of a lived social equality for women. It is my hope that issues raised by technologies like Jennicam might, through the relative “newness” of their contexts, open up a safe space for dialogue for those with differing visions on how women’s lived social equality might be achieved. My aim is not to suggest that feminists must shirk from or resolve their substantive differences, but to suggest that some aspects of both

36. In an interview posted online in 2007, Ringley reported that after years of being so “over-exposed,” she no longer had a website or even a MySpace page and was really enjoying her privacy: “Behind the Scenes with Jennifer Ringley,” WebJunk TV (posted 18 March 2007), online: http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/e/e0/Jennicam_02.jpg/300px-Jennicam_02.jpg&imgrefurl=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JenniCam&h=225&w=300&sz=21&hl=en&start=11&um=1&tbnid=5dwhueB6yGXteM:&tbnh=87&tbnw=116&prev=/images%3Fq%3D%2Bjennifer%2Bringley%2Bcat%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN.

37. Senft, “Camgirls,” 108–109 (n. 4).

38. Blogging and social networking trends involve millions in exposing their own personal information online: Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross, “Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing and Privacy on the Facebook,” *Privacy Enhancing Technologies Workshop* (2006): 1, <http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/~acquisti/papers/acquisti-gross-facebook-privacy-PET-final.pdf>.

39. I use the term “feminist” to refer to those dedicated to the objective of a lived social equality for women. In this particular context, I am focusing on those whose work strives to analyse and understand the potential contribution of the webcamming phenomenon to this lived social equality.

40. Burgin, “Jenni’s Room,” (n. 15); Jimroglou, “A Camera with a View,” (n. 26); Hille Koskela, “Webcams, TV Shows and Mobile phones: Empowering Exhibitionism,” *Surveillance & Society* 2, no. 2 (2004): 199, [http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles2\(2\)/webcams.pdf](http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles2(2)/webcams.pdf).

past and current approaches may be more effective than others in forming strategies aimed at achieving meaningful social change.⁴¹

Three years before the final curtain fell on Jennicam, Anita Allen reflected on the continuing relevance of the pre-cyberspace feminist position on privacy set out in her 1988 book *Uneasy Access*.⁴² In 1988, Allen had presented privacy as a condition of inaccessibility to others. She argued that the problem for women was that they had enjoyed too much of the wrong kinds of privacy (in the forms of modesty, isolation, chastity, and domestic violation) and too little of the right kinds, including “opportunities for replenishing solitude and independent decision making.”⁴³

Allen characterized her analysis in *Uneasy Access* as a feminist analysis with a liberal orientation.⁴⁴ It was feminist in that it accepted the idea that men and women had traditionally occupied separate spheres and the idea that the traditional liberal focus on keeping the state out of the private sphere—the sphere primarily occupied by women—had often disbenefited women by allowing various forms of domestic oppression to remain unchecked.⁴⁵ At the same time, Allen acknowledged the liberal orientation of her approach. Rather than suggesting that privacy was unlikely to *ever* materially advance the feminist project, Allen argued in favour of finding ways to ensure that the kinds of privacy traditionally enjoyed by individual men (such as “opportunities for replenishing solitude and independent decision making”) were extended equally to individual women.⁴⁶

Writing in 2000, Allen reflected on the fact that women’s economic and social positions had changed significantly since the publication of *Uneasy Access*, leaving many women more centrally located in the public sphere than ever before. Even so, she noted that this existence within the public sphere carried other privacy-related burdens unique to women—including exposure to sexual harassment and more restrictive standards of modesty.⁴⁷

When she approached the question of the relevance of cyberspace to her analysis, Allen concluded that themes raised by feminists in real space, such as objectification, subordination, violence, and isolation, were mapping themselves

41. Fraser and Nicholson suggest the importance of examining the helpful critiques that so-called feminist and post-modern positions can offer one another: Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, *Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 20.

42. Anita L. Allen, *Uneasy Access—Privacy for Women in a Free Society* (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

43. Anita L. Allen, “Still Uneasy: Gender and Privacy in Cyberspace,” *Stanford Law Review* 52 (2000): 1179.

44. *Ibid.*, 1182–1183.

45. *Ibid.*, 1177, 1182.

46. *Ibid.*, 1183.

47. *Ibid.*, 1180.

onto cyberspace.⁴⁸ Further, she argued that women's privacy was *more* at peril in cyberspace than men's, because there was a disrespect shown both for women and for the forms of privacy and intimacy most valued by women.⁴⁹ Allen identified voluntary self-exposure as a key abrogator of privacy in cyberspace and suggested that it created an expectation of the virtually unlimited accessibility of the female body.⁵⁰ Cyberspace practices, like voluntary webcamming in the home, she argued, directly raised the question of whether it was possible to invade one's own privacy, invoking the need for a liberal society to do more than simply criticize and tolerate.⁵¹

Allen suggested elsewhere that liberal thinkers might well be moved to support legislation that limited individuals' control over their own personal information on the basis that "people are choosing to give up more privacy than is consistent with liberal conceptions of the person or the liberal way of life."⁵² She argued for recognition of the moral limits on the individual choice to give up personal information through self-disclosure and self-exposure.⁵³ In this way, Allen posited a vision that accepted the moral agency of individuals, but recognized occasions of incompatibility between the individual choice to waive control over personal information and a broader societal interest in maintaining personally and socially beneficial forms of privacy.⁵⁴

Working from this perspective, Allen analyzed a number of examples of privacy-abrogating activities by women online—everything from posting mastectomy surgeries and live births online to egg selling, online communities, and fetishism. In relation to these examples, Allen stated,

For better and sometimes for worse, in my opinion, these women repudiate expectations of female modesty, chastity and domestic seclusion.⁵⁵

Nestled prominently among Allen's examples of repudiation was Jennicam. Allen acknowledged that in her project, Ringley made decisions "that represent a sharp break with the past and its expectations of domestic privacy and female modesty."⁵⁶ However, even as Allen recognized Ringley's rejection of the "wrong kinds of privacy," she expressed concern about the project's appeal to the same

48. *Ibid.*, 1184.

49. *Ibid.*, 1179.

50. *Ibid.*, 1184.

51. *Ibid.*, 1185.

52. Anita Allen, "Privacy as Data Control: Conceptual, Practical, and Moral Limits of the Paradigm," *Connecticut Law Review* 32 (2000): 871.

53. *Ibid.*, 871. She later more fully articulated this perspective in Anita Allen, *Why Privacy Isn't Everything: Feminist Reflections on Personal Accountability* (Boulder & New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

54. *Ibid.*

55. Allen, "Still Uneasy," 1187 (n. 43).

56. *Ibid.*, 1191.

male voyeuristic tendencies that have dominated women's experience in real space:

Jenni's use of the cyber-world is playful and inventive, but it also replicates the condition of women in the real world—women are objects or commodities, and they are available on demand to men with “needs.”⁵⁷

Allen suggested Ringley's project was unlikely to advance women's interests, in that it appealed primarily to the “prurient interests” of men to see a strange woman's body.⁵⁸ She contrasted Jennicam with body-exposing projects of other women online, projects that she viewed as educational and, therefore, perhaps valuable enough to warrant the trade-off of privacy that was necessarily entailed in the exposure. Allen argued that access to information such as the reality of breast cancer through online streaming of a woman named “Patti's” double mastectomy and reconstructive surgeries brought to light essential issues that have been historically withheld from public view and discourse to the detriment of women's health.⁵⁹ In her comparison of Patti's double mastectomy with Jennicam, Allen acknowledged that “[s]ome feminists would applaud Jenni no less loudly than they would applaud Patti.” However, Allen concluded, “If Patti is a teacher, Jenni is a call girl.”⁶⁰

IV. RECURRING THEMES: PRIVACY, IDENTITY AND PORNOGRAPHY

Allen's analysis acknowledges that flouting privacy could be freeing for women, especially if the trade-off involves access to other social goods for women, such as education. However, she remains cautious about the risk that such flouting may reinforce patriarchal notions about men's access to the bodies of women that they do not know. Others have suggested that traditional understandings of private and public spaces and strangers and intimates may not map onto multi-media projects such as Jennicam, which involve numerous forms of mediated interaction between the watcher and the watched.⁶¹

Further, one might wish to consider whether projects like Jennicam present other potential benefits not taken into account by Allen. Not only might Ringley's choice to occasionally display her naked body constitute an individually empowering rejection of the regime of shame surrounding women's bodies, a collective benefit may flow. Waivers like Ringley's may offer images that counter often-unrealistic, Hollywoodized versions of beauty and sexuality that undermine the

57. *Ibid.*, 1191.

58. *Ibid.*, 1191.

59. *Ibid.*, 1188.

60. *Ibid.*, 1191.

61. Senft, “Camgirls,” 213 (n. 4).

confidence and self-perception of many girls and women.⁶² One might also argue that the moments of Ringley's bodily exposure should be viewed in the context of her project as a whole, a context in which multiple identities of "woman" were performed—student, cat-lover, web designer, patient, sleeper, daughter, and girlfriend, to name a few. Otherwise, we may too easily dismiss the potential meaning of projects such as this to the sum of their sexually explicit moments, indirectly reinforcing patriarchal constructions through our acceptance of the interpretations of the voyeuristic male consumer. On the other hand, it seems irresponsible for feminists to posit the potential for the realization of the dream of women as powerful agents over their own identities, including with respect to their sexuality, without referring to the stark reality of patriarchal constructions that continue to interfere with the realization of this agency.

To my mind, experiments like Jennicam and analyses such as Allen's raise some of the central tensions among feminists and within feminisms. I propose to address two of them here: (a) privacy's usefulness (or uselessness) in achieving the project of a lived social equality for women; and (b) defining "woman" by reference to pornography.⁶³

A. Privacy's "Usefulness" in the Social Equality Project

When Ringley turned the webcam onto her home life, making it accessible to all of those with an Internet connection, she contradicted (however consciously or unconsciously) a long-standing western societal presumption that what goes on inside the home is private. When she went further to transmit sequences of her in various states of undress and in sexual activity, her acts flew in the face of another such presumption—that women's naked bodies and sexual activity are private. Whether the privacy norm itself and explicit female rejections of interpretations thereof should be considered beneficial to the feminist struggle for equality has been a matter of some disagreement within feminist communities.

Allen remains committed to the idea that privacy is essential in promoting the objectives of a liberal society and can still be useful to women, provided that they are accorded access to the "right" kinds—privacy in service of "replenishing solitude and independent decision making," for example. Feminists ought not to throw away privacy because of its checkered past. Rather, they ought to seek access to the benefits of privacy that have long been enjoyed by men.⁶⁴

62. For further analysis, see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 1990), 185–186.

63. The term "pornography" is used quite differently by various feminists and, as will be discussed in detail in sub-part B below, these different approaches to the definition of pornography contribute significantly to the differences of opinion as to its social meaning and potential as a tool for effecting social change.

64. Allen, "Still Uneasy," 1182–1183 (n. 43).

In contrast, feminists like Catharine MacKinnon have questioned whether privacy is so steeped in a negative, individualistic history of protecting “private” male violence against women from public scrutiny and sanction that it is, at minimum, useless to and, more likely, harmful to the pursuit of a lived equality for women.⁶⁵ What Martha Nussbaum once referred to as a primary tool in defending the “killers of women,”⁶⁶ MacKinnon characterized as follows:

This epistemic problem explains why privacy doctrine is most at home at home, the place women experience the most force, in the family, and why it centers on sex . . . For women the measure of the intimacy has been the measure of the oppression. This is why feminism has had to explode the private. This is why feminism has seen the personal as political. The private is public for those for whom the personal is political. In this sense, for women there is no private, either normatively or empirically.⁶⁷

MacKinnon, therefore, has urged against a feminist strategy that involves primary reliance on “privacy,” at least as it is predominantly understood within the western legal tradition. The issue, from this perspective, is not whether women have enough of the right kinds of “privacy,” but whether privacy could ever be an effective tool in a state of inequality, where women are regularly placed within or associated with the private domain and men within the public. Privacy, under these conditions, it is argued, simply reinforces men’s freedom to dominate women.

Critical race scholar Patricia Williams, on the other hand, has expressed more optimistic ideas about privacy’s utility in struggles for social justice. Reflecting on the historic inability of blacks, and in particular of black women, to assert any meaningful right to privacy, Williams suggested that a better strategy was to redefine and redistribute privacy in a socially meaningful way “so that privacy is turned from exclusion based on self-regard into regard for another’s fragile, mysterious autonomy.”⁶⁸

B. Defining “Woman” by Reference to Pornography

When Ringley performed in high heels and garter belts or had sex with her boyfriend in front of her webcam, did she waive her privacy in exchange for reinforcing the pornographic stereotype of women’s sexual accessibility to men?

65. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 101 (n.1); Martha C. Nussbaum, “Is Privacy Bad for Women?” *Boston Review* (April/May 2000), <http://bostonreview.net/BR25.2/nussbaum.html>.

66. Nussbaum, *ibid.*

67. Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward A Feminist Theory of the State* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 191.

68. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 164–165.

Allen's analysis seems to suggest so. In contrast, others have asked why one would zero in on those relatively few occasions in order to define Ringley, her project, and its purposes and, better yet, if one did so, why one would not envision Ringley's project as a liberating one.⁶⁹ These differing visions of the social meaning of sexually explicit imagery of women long predate Jennicam, and have animated feminist debate since at least the 1980s when Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin sought to define pornography as an act of sex discrimination and a primary component of inequality between men and women. MacKinnon asserted,

[P]ornography, with the rape and prostitution in which it participates, institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the eroticization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female. Gender is sexual. Pornography constitutes the meaning of that sexuality. Men treat women as whom they see women as being. Pornography constructs who that is. Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be. Pornography is that way.⁷⁰

Dworkin conceptualized pornography under male supremacy as "the subordination of women perfectly achieved [as] the access to [women's] bodies as a birthright to men."⁷¹

The arguments that the identity "woman" is socially constructed primarily in terms of sexual accessibility and submission to men, and that pornography is instrumental in creating and maintaining this sexual and gender hierarchy, stirred intense controversy in the feminist community. It is a controversy that seems, at least in some senses, to be reflected in feminist analyses of Jennicam. Allen maintained that Jennicam simply resulted in a waiver of privacy, of Ringley's modesty, in exchange for a supply of further sexualized images that reinforce the social construction of "woman" as she who is sexually accessible to men. Another approach, however, shares more in common with feminist critiques of Dworkin and MacKinnon's position. These critiques have arisen from feminists variously labeled as writing from "pro-sex" and "postmodern" positions—positions with which the so-called third wave of young feminist women is said to identify.⁷² Differences in view have centered on what is meant by "pornography," and whether

69. Senft, "Camgirls," 199, 240 (n. 4).

70. MacKinnon, *Feminist Theory*, 197 (n. 67).

71. Andrea Dworkin, "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Equality and Pornography" in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.

72. For further analysis, see Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta—Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000); Bridget J. Crawford, "Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory: Young Women, Pornography and the Praxis of Pleasure," *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 14 (2007): 99.

new forms of pornography could meaningfully counter and undermine the stereotypical constructions emanating from the materials addressed by Dworkin and MacKinnon.

Wendy Brown criticized MacKinnon's approach primarily on the basis that it mirrored the very system that it purported to criticize—heterosexual pornography.⁷³ Two of Brown's insights seem particularly pertinent in the context of the Jennicam debate. First, she argued that the Dworkin and MacKinnon theory erroneously converted "woman"—as discriminated against by virtue of her status as the sex object of man—into a universal truth from a temporary, particularized moment in history.⁷⁴ Brown suggested that pornography's role in the sexualized social construction of gender described by MacKinnon was primarily the product of a lack of sites of gender production and gender effects, which allowed a male heterosexual perspective to produce the binaries male and female that enhanced male dominance.⁷⁵ By presenting women's subjectivity as completely encompassed by the sexualized definition offered by mainstream heterosexual pornography at that moment,⁷⁶ Brown suggested that MacKinnon and Dworkin's approach offered no possibility for change—no possibility for the sexual emancipation of women.⁷⁷

Brown then suggested that the moment in history described by MacKinnon and Dworkin has been shifted materially through representations of gender, sex, and sexuality that defy the male/female binary essential to their theory. Brown argued that it is through the profusion of sexualized images offering a multiplicity of gender and sexual identities that confining social constructions of mainstream heterosexual pornography can be undone.⁷⁸ She asserted that social orders are constructed in multiple sites and that women, as a class have the capacity to engage in subversive resignification—to seek sexual emancipation

73. Wendy Brown, "The Mirror of Pornography" in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 198–217.

74. *Ibid.*, 207.

75. *Ibid.*

76. I find this aspect of Brown's analysis to be somewhat stilted and overreaching. The possibility of an erotic literature—such as that proposed by Audre Lorde ("Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (California: The Crossing Press, 1984), 53)—is not foreclosed by the Dworkin and MacKinnon analysis. Admittedly, however, where the sex or fantasies involved replicate the theme of female submission at the behest of male dominance, their analysis would certainly suggest the strong possibility of a false consciousness in women who claim to take pleasure in those roles. In other words, under their analysis, it becomes difficult to tell where what one woman thinks and feels ends and what she has been trained to think and feel begins.

77. In this regard, Brown notes, "MacKinnon's analysis is bound to its oft-noted theoretical closures and political foreclosures. 'There's no way out' is among students' most frequent responses to her work": Brown, "The Mirror of Pornography," 211 (n. 73).

78. *Ibid.*, 214.

on their own terms. The resignification process could even, Brown suggested, lead to the conclusion that some women consciously express and experience pleasure through submission. She proposed for feminism the task of articulating what she described as “more extravagant and democratic” analyses than that of Dworkin and MacKinnon.⁷⁹

The idea that pornography, the erotic, and sexuality in general are susceptible to being reconfigured and redefined in more empowering ways for women is also reflected in the work of Angela Davis, Drucilla Cornell, and Candida Royalle. Davis, who suggested the problem lay in “our contemporary ideology of pornography [that] does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers,”⁸⁰ advocated for pornography depicting sexuality as part of broader social contexts involving healthy relationships with others.⁸¹

Like Davis, Cornell held out hope for a redefinition of sex and sexuality not through legal restrictions on pornography, but through support for more egalitarian productions that refute the gender stereotypes presented in mainstream heterosexual pornography.⁸² Rather than working from the premise that the identity “woman” carved out in mainstream pornography defines all women for all time, necessarily compelling retreat from sexuality in order for women to be equal, Cornell suggests opening up production of imagery that allows women to explore their “imaginary domain”—“the moral and psychic space we as sexuate beings need in order to freely play with the sexual persona through which we shape our sexual identity, whether as man or woman, straight, gay, lesbian or transgender.”⁸³ She argued that cinematic presentations of the fantasies of women characters, such as those depicted in Candida Royalle’s work, presented hope for transformative visions of sexuality.⁸⁴

Royalle—both an actor in pornography and a producer of it—prides herself in the production of erotic materials in which the working conditions allow those

79. Brown, “The Mirror of Pornography,” 198 (n. 73).

80. Angela Davis, “Polemical Preface: Pornography in the Service of Women” in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 527.

81. *Ibid.*, 539.

82. Drucilla Cornell, “Pornography’s Temptation” in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 553. The distinction between heterosexual pornography and gay and lesbian pornography is one made by authors like Brown and Cornell that has been powerfully contested by authors such as Christopher N. Kendall, *Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004) and Janine Benedet, “Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium v. Minister of Justice: Sex Equality and the Attack on R. v. Butler,” *Osgoode Hall Law Review* 39 (2001): 187.

83. *Ibid.*, 554.

84. *Ibid.*, 565. In this regard, the ideals behind Royalle’s work seem to address many of the features of the male gaze identified as problematic by Mulvey in her analysis of film: Senft, “Camgirls,” 75 (n. 4).

presented as submissive to be in control.⁸⁵ Concerned that women have been robbed of an aspect of their selves and their power by being told not to explore or to trust their sexual fantasies, Royalle insists on productions in which it is clear that the representations in play reflect the acting out of the fantasies of the woman rather than the man.⁸⁶ Further, her work strives to incorporate sexuality within the social context of other aspects of human interaction.

As the work of critical race scholars such as Sherene Razack and Kimberle Crenshaw reminds us, however, sexual emancipation for *all* women requires counter-narratives to far more than the dominant male/submissive female binary. Representations of sexuality frequenting much mainstream pornography also interlock with racist stereotypes. Whereas Caucasian and Asian women are stereotypically represented as submissive in mainstream pornography, Aboriginal⁸⁷ and black⁸⁸ women are frequently presented as hyper-sexualized predators, constantly sexually accessible to men. These myths are then used to stereotype women and even to justify sexual violence against them—from the typecast submissive white and Asian women caricatured as too modest either to consent or dissent, to mythical, hyper-sexualized Aboriginal and black women stereotyped into a constant state of consent. These insights make clear that sexual emancipation through woman-centered representations of sexuality depends upon much more than simply combating imagery of gendered dominance and submission.

If one extracts some of the key messages playing out in the feminist debates relating to privacy and pornography, one sees how aspects of Allen's analysis fit within the broader debate, and also how some of the key aspects and observations of the larger debate appear to apply directly to Jennicam. With respect to privacy, one fundamental question is whether privacy is a right or value that is strategically worth attempting to assert and enforce in order to improve women's social position—and to recognize that it is not equally accessible to all women. With respect to pornography, one fundamental question⁸⁹ is whether it is possible to transform pornography and its meanings by reshaping it in a manner that counters the aspects of mainstream pornography that constrain the identity "woman" with stereotyped presumptions of sexuality constructed not only in

85. Candida Royalle, "Porn in the USA" in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 546.

86. *Ibid.*, 542, 546.

87. Sherene Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2000): 99.

88. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241.

89. Another perhaps more fundamental question is whether it is a normatively useful exercise to attempt to breathe equality-affirming life into a form that has for so long been premised upon and drawn its power from inequality.

relation to gender but to interlocking axes of discrimination such as race. For those who believe that the resignification project is worth the effort, critical factors would appear to include the offering of sexual imagery that refutes raced and gendered stereotypes premised on dominance and submission present in mainstream pornography, the presentation of sex within the broader context of human interaction, the offering of imagery challenging dualistic sexes and sexualities, and the offering of imagery over which and in which women maintain control.

C. Thinking Strategically

Is flouting “privacy” a viable feminist strategy? Jennicam arguably flouted traditional notions of privacy in at least two senses. First, Ringley introduced a camera into what is traditionally viewed as the “private” sanctum of the home and made that content publicly accessible. Second, within the content that was released, Ringley included images of herself in various states of undress and engaged in various sexual activities. Could flouting these aspects of privacy constitute part of a viable feminist strategy and, if so, how?

To the extent that Ringley’s exposure of the goings-on in her home could be characterized as transgressing notions of white, upper-middle-class feminized domesticity—rejecting the “a woman’s place is in the home” tradition, it could well contribute to a demystification of the sanctity of the “home” that has been central to sheltering, among other things, male violence from social scrutiny.

At the same time that the privacy of the home has played a central role in sheltering male violence from state intervention, it can equally play a role in sheltering women in marginalized communities from the glare of public surveillance. Moreover, as the work of authors such as Williams suggests, the significance of a right to privacy may be much more easily dismissed by those of us in communities historically vested with the privilege of even asserting such a right to begin with. Given the somewhat duplicitous role that the “home” can play in women’s lives and the social situatedness of having the privilege to “reject” privacy, it seems at least prudent to question whether a general “flouting” of the privacy of that “place” by a white, upper-middle-class, college-educated woman is likely to prove strategically useful to women who are not as comfortably situated.

With respect to flouting notions of what women are supposed to be doing in the private spaces of the home, it is possible to imagine situations in which a webcam might help to dispel sexualized or domesticized mythologies about what women are actually doing in their homes. The 24/7 nature of Jennicam presented an interesting prospect for doing this by allowing for the reality of the plain old mundane monotony that characterized much of the (in)action in Ringley’s home. Unsurprisingly, however, it seems to have been the promise of the moments of sexual display that motivated many of her mainly male “fans” to tune in regularly.

Similarly, Ringley's flouting of the shroud of modesty cast around women's bodies might be seen as an empowering move—particularly insofar as she described one of the ends of her project to be speaking back to the beauty myths perpetuated in mainstream media. However, the very nature and existence of any such shroud is contentious due to the strangely duplicitous standards that seem to operate in western culture around the issue of women's naked bodies. In fact, the partially clad and unclad bodies of women permeate western culture and media—everything from cars to computers are eroticized through imagery of the naked or semi-naked female stranger. In contrast to what Allen argued about access to strange women's bodies, I would suggest that western culture is quite comfortable with the idea of having access to strange women's bodies. What we are more uncomfortable with is the concept of seeing the naked bodies of women with whom we are familiar as well as those thought to depart too significantly from the "norm."⁹⁰

If one takes into account another author's suggestion that what happens in situations like Jennicam is the development of a sort of strange intimacy between the watcher and the watched,⁹¹ it becomes difficult to tell whether Ringley was flouting convention by flashing her neighbors or actually behaving perfectly consistently with it by flashing strangers. One thing, however, seems certain. By having placed the camera in her home and chosen to turn it on and keep it on, Ringley flouted that aspect of convention that places the *initial* power of exposure in the hands of the other (the magazine, newspaper, and television producers for example).

As a result, it seems perfectly plausible to argue that projects like Jennicam have at least a limited potential to flout unhelpfully controlling conceptions of privacy as enforced domesticity and modesty by presenting an unromanticized and persisting insight into one woman's domestic sphere. Presentation of nudity as part of this context, particularly of a body distinct from conventional media standards of beauty as assessed by the individual woman herself, might also be conceptualized in this way. How far exposure of a white, middle class, blonde-haired woman's body takes us in terms of transgressing that norm is, however, certainly open to legitimate question. The more troubling aspect of Jennicam, and webcamming more generally, is the capacity of the audience to isolate imagery from its context and employ it in service of more mainstream messages affirming male entitlement to continuing access to women's bodies. Similar concerns arise in relation to pornographic meanings.

Can camgirl camp⁹² destabilize the mainstream pornographic meaning of "woman"? The idea that the genders male and female are socially constructed

90. The "norm" is defined and confined by interlocking axes of discrimination, including race, ethnicity, sexual identity and ability.

91. Senft, "Camgirls," 213 (n. 4).

92. Senft, "Camgirls," 240 (n. 4).

and that pornography plays a central role in that construction are premises broadly accepted by many feminists.⁹³ Two contentious issues stem from these premises, however. First is the question of whether we would be freer if gender identities were left behind altogether. Second is the question of what role a different approach to pornography might play in the abandonment or reshaping of mainstream constructs.

Jennicam, shaped as it was by her mainstream, white, upper-middle-class existence, hardly presented possibilities for transgression with respect to sexual identities. The sexual imagery that Ringley presented largely played to the heterosexual male fantasy that animates mainstream pornography. However, the way in which Jennicam allowed us to see sexuality and gender being performed in daily life opened up a practical space in which concepts like performativity and the multiplicity of gender can be more easily grasped.

Jennicam, too, represents the opening up of a medium within which women might begin to gain greater access to a means of producing erotic imagery to counter mainstream pornography and its stereotypical messaging. However, when one considers the specifics of Jennicam, the criteria attached to visions of the subversive potential of a woman-centered reshaping of pornography seem to be lacking. First, staged heterofantasmic sexualized performances seem difficult to characterize as subversive of mainstream stereotypes—particularly where the performer is aware of, and perhaps strangely intimate with, the watcher, but not certain whether he is there or what exactly it is he is doing. These performances and other sexual activity that arose in the ordinary course of events in Ringley's life were part of an ongoing presentation of the broader social context of her life. In that way, Ringley's experiment presented the possibility of a pornography that integrates sex into the broader context of human interaction. The initial production was something over which Ringley asserted a degree of control,⁹⁴ serving both as a subject and object of the webcam. Problematically, however, ultimate control over the images, once released to the Internet, was placed in the hands of the watchers—some of whom chose to excerpt the sexual from its context in order to recreate material that shares many of the features of voyeuristic mainstream pornography.

In the case of Jennicam, the potential for subversive resignification is arguably undermined by the medium itself, insofar as it permits reversion of the content both to fit the traditional pornographic mould and to tell the same old story about the accessibility of women's bodies. Whether emerging Web 2.0 technologies will offer new potentialities for overcoming this particular bug is likely to be

93. However, the question of whether sex is the sole determinant of gender remains heavily contested.

94. However, Ringley certainly did not control the cinematic angling and shots or consciously script them in the way that Royalle suggested was essential to affirmation: Royalle, "Porn in the USA," (n. 84).

significantly affected by the features of the technologies themselves—and perhaps to an even greater extent on their accessibility to persons whose bodies do not coincide with those constructed as the “norm.”

V. CONCLUSION

For me, what is perhaps the most important message arising from my thinking about Jennicam, the differing feminist responses to it, and the deeper theoretical contests lying below those differences, is the importance of direct feminist-to-feminist dialogue on issues of privacy, identity, and pornography. A key historic stumbling block has been in defining the terms of inter-feminist engagement in a way that promotes understanding and dialogue even as it fails to promote anything approaching unanimity.⁹⁵

As feminists, we should consider the strategic benefits to the overall project of lived social equality for women of opening up to ideas inconsistent with our own, however deeply held. “New” technologies (as webcamming once was) present us with fresh terrain that allows us to assess the “truths” to which many of us have become quite attached in an atmosphere that doesn’t require admitting that we may have gotten a few things wrong. Similarly, they invite a sharing of wisdom and thinking between contested feminisms and generations of feminists within new contexts that provide opportunities for recognizing that those who went before may also have gotten a few things right.

Experiments like Jennicam allow us to revisit the potential for individual transgression in the face of powerful social constructions and to reconsider concepts like privacy and pornography as tools for advancing the quest for a lived equality for women. Although, at the end of the day, Ringley’s experiment itself was probably of limited utility in relation to this quest, the potential of future experiments with future technologies remains a theoretically open question. As these experiments and technologies unfold, I look forward to productive feminist dialogues unfolding along with them.

95. Unanimity is neither a practical nor a desirable goal. Disagreement about our views offers each of us the opportunity to clarify what it is we are really saying and to recognize strengths and weaknesses that may lead us to productive and empowering modifications in our thinking.

