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Shine Louise Houston and the metapornographic queering of voyeurism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the work of filmmaker-producer Shine Louise Houston, founder of Pink and White Productions and director of the lesbian porn classic *The Crash Pad*, which spawned an eponymous, website-based series. Houston, whose 15-year tenure directing the Crash Pad Series ended in 2022, has crafted a queer pornography that interrogates notions of authenticity, largely through her signature trope of inviting, and meeting head on, the voyeuristic gaze. While celebrating Houston's contribution to the production and distribution of queerly diverse porn, we also argue for a recognition of her metapornographic vision.

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In her contribution 'Mighty Real' to the edited collection *Porn After Porn*, BIPOC queer porn director and producer Shine Louise Houston explains her stance on sexual authenticity, starting from a critique of her own production company's marketing (Houston 2014). Although the promotional materials of Pink and White Productions laud her for 'bring[ing] to the web authentic female and queer sexuality', she nuances the concept of authenticity, stating that 'we are doing what we can to be the site of production of a queer discourse of sexuality. We offer representations not of the *genuine reality* of queer sexuality, but of its *incredible possibility*' (Houston 2014, 118; emphases added). This mission statement aligns Houston's films not only with a larger tradition of queer porn, such as invoked by Shawna Lipton's characterization of lesbian pornography as a 'political utopia ... celebrat[ing] radical queer identifications and cultural aspirations' (2012, 202), but also with Houston's own past as a film graduate who worked at the legendary San Francisco sex shop Good Vibrations. Taking her knowledge of filmmaking from the one and her appreciation of erotic diversity from the other, she 'kind of combined the two and created the company' Pink and White Productions in 2002 (Darnell 2022), followed by her debut film *The Crash Pad* (Houston, dir. 2005), whose success (including a Feminist Porn award for 'Hottest Dyke Sex Scene') paved the way for the subscription website CrashPadSeries.com in 2007 and the distribution platform for independent queer pornography, PinkLabel.tv, in 2012. Across all of these directorial and curatorial

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efforts, Houston has remained committed to the 'incredible possibility' of queer sexuality, aiming to use 'hot porn' to promote the 'beauty and sexiness' of a wide range of body types, gender expressions and erogenous zones (Houston 2014, 118–119) while deconstructing, according to Ariane Cruz, 'the racialized sexualities in the landscape of contemporary American commercial porn' (2016, 166). In the process, Houston has developed not only a recognizable style but also a *modus operandi* of porn filmmaking which queers authenticity and amplifies intimacy through the paradoxical embrace of voyeurism. To make inclusive and ethical queer porn, for Houston, is not to deny modes of voyeuristic pleasure but rather to enfold them reflexively into pornographic production. Indeed, by highlighting her own voyeuristic gaze as a filmmaker, Houston introduces a playfully subversive level of metapornography to queer porn.

This style and approach are already visible in *The Crash Pad*, which, as Houston laughingly admits, became 'an instant cult classic' (Darnell 2022). The film consists of four separate vignettes of gender and racially diverse lesbians having joyous sex, from double penetration with strap-ons ('within the first seven minutes!', crows the website blurb) to 'cocksucking, cuntlicking, anal fucking, rimming, squirting, masturbating, three-ways, and more' (Pink & White Productions, n.d.). The central conceit which connects the vignettes involves the 'crash pad', a secret apartment for sex which can only be used seven times before the holder of the key has to pass it on to somebody else. Overseen by an omniscient key keeper, the crash pad trope introduces a number of themes: it functions as a place removed from daily life for enacting sexual fantasy, as a set overseen by someone who is watching, and as a means of community-creation through the passing of the key. Importantly, Houston does not cast performers for her shoots, but rather invites people from her own community (or, later, from the virtual community of Crash-PadSeries.com) to come individually or with their lovers to have sex in front of the camera. As she writes about the making of *The Crash Pad*, '[w]ith casting out of my hands, a crew of four, and performers who make their own decisions about how their scenes will proceed' (Houston 2014, 117), Houston ended up directing the cameras but not the performers, a practice she has retained as a pornographer whose job, she claims, is 'pretty much ... to follow [the performers] and make a coherent story' through editing (Darnell 2022).

This returns us to the issue of authenticity, for the '[r]eal sex, real orgasms, real sweat, real bodily fluids, real laughter' (Pink & White Productions n.d.) touted on the Crash Pad Series website are indeed real in the sense that performers choose their own 'positions, fantasies, pacing, gender identifications, and sexual acts' (Houston 2014, 117). As Houston explains in 'Mighty Real', authenticity for her means simply that people 'have sex this way' or, more to the point given the mediation of filming, 'at least on the day we shot, the models were having the sex of their choosing' (2014, 117). What Houston rejects within this discourse is any claim to real identities arising from fixed desires, insisting that 'we are not taking part in a race to realness, as if queers need to occupy the land of the real that heteros have possessed for so long' (2014, 118). Refusing a totalizing extension of the 'truthfulness' of the performers' desire to the whole of their (or anyone's) sexuality, Houston's work thus celebrates the sex that people have (on the day, in front of her cameras) while embracing the anti-identitarian impulse of queer theory (Seise 2010, 19–21; Sedgwick 2013). If, as Tim Dean argues, the 'radical force' of queerness lies in its rejection of the normalizing function of social and psychological

identities (2003, 240), then Houston reframes this radical force as the ‘incredible possibility’ of real people’s sex acts rather than putatively authentic identities.

The Crash Pad, moreover, is a significant porn film not only because the sex is both ‘real’ and ‘hot’ – is, indeed, real hot – but also because of the way it produces intimacy through voyeurism. In what will become a signature move, Houston opts to play up the voyeuristic framing necessary to pornography, rather than glossing it over as in commercial porn. Indeed, *The Crash Pad* invokes voyeurism from its pre-credits opening, by starting with a quick pan across the walls of an empty room before settling on a doorway through which we watch a couple having strap-on sex in heels-up missionary position (fabulous transparent heels, to boot). The doorway, like the recurring trope of the keyhole in later Crash Pad Series videos, positions us as being on the outside looking in, but the conceit of the secret apartment means that we are also already there, already on the inside. As Chris Straayer notes about any realist (porn) film, ‘the viewer is psychologically both inside and outside the image, swaying between identification and voyeurism’ (1996, 185). Deploying the full range of the cinematic gaze, Houston alternates between voyeuristic distance and intimate, graphic proximity: the post-credits shot, although we might expect more of the missionary couple, immediately cuts to an extreme close-up, first in black and white and then in colour, of a black dildo entering a vagina. As if to invite our voyeurism further, the fucking couple is then interrupted by another couple who does not realize the apartment is being used. Rather than leave, one member of the new couple (the iconic Jiz Lee, here in their first porn role) is invited by a seductively beckoning finger to join the couple on the bed, while the other partner is happy to stand in the corner and watch, with repeated cutaways in the ensuing ménage-à-trois assuring us of the watcher’s pleasure as well as integrating her into the sex scene.

Not content to simply suture the viewer/voyeur into the action via a diegetic stand-in, Houston frames the final vignette’s solo performer gazing directly into the camera while masturbating with a dildo. In so doing, the performer’s gaze pierces the screen and acknowledges the viewer’s voyeuristic position as part of the shared erotic pleasure. Of course, ‘piercing the screen’ is a fiction, since the performer actually looks into the camera lens, but here, too, Houston embraces the reality of voyeurism, her own as well as ours. When the performer Jo casts her final look into the camera, with a little half-smile and parting wave, the camera pulls back to reveal her image on a computer screen being looked at by none other than Houston herself – who then turns to look at us over her shoulder with an arched brow and knowing smile. As Houston implies with this gesture, voyeurism in pornography is to be neither feared nor ignored, but rather welcomed as a necessary aspect of the tangle of erotic intimacy between performer, filmmaker, and viewer. This is a technique that Houston will use repeatedly in the more than 300 Crash Pad Series videos to follow, and which she will playfully send up in her 2020 short *Camera and I*, where the performer Jasko Fide quite literally embraces the voyeuristic camera by having sex with it.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing logistical difficulties for the porn industry in particular, the Crash Pad Series underwent a significant aesthetic shift. Initially, Pink and White Productions compensated for its inability to film on set by producing a series of ‘Quarantine Specials’, clips consisting of footage from existing episodes intercut with new shots of the performers filming themselves while reminiscing about their experience on set. When regular production resumed in November 2020 after a

10-month hiatus, this was possible only under drastically changed conditions. Beginning with episode 312, Houston and her collaborator Ajaporn remotely operated four statically mounted cameras, relaying directions to the performers via Walkie Talkie. If the performers were not shooting alone, they now exclusively worked in couples who were actually quarantining together. These two factors – remotely operated cameras and real-life couples – made the situation on set markedly similar to the fantasy of voyeurism upheld by the configuration of gazes in *The Crash Pad* film and the first 311 episodes of the series: Houston, the ‘Keymaster’, watches on a screen as performers have sex (almost) ‘in private’, seeing only each other. This is stressed by the way the performers talk about the experience in the post-shoot interview videos that accompany each episode on the series’ website. By frequently comparing their activities on set to what they would do in their private bedrooms – from finally being allowed to loudly moan and spank (episode 312), to having difficulties preparing for anal penetration (episode 314) or being on a smaller bed than usual (episode 315) – the performers implicitly stress the fundamental equivalence of what we see on screen and what they get up to when truly unobserved. As Blair Switch puts it in episode 315’s behind-the-scenes clip: ‘the best performance, if you want to call it that, ... is to go about how we normally do this. So. It’s mostly logistical things [that are challenging]’ (Pink & White Productions 2021a).

Faced with such challenges, a filmmaker less interested in the nuances and contradictions of authenticity might be tempted to insist on representing ‘unmediated’ sexuality. Houston’s *mise-en-scène*, however, highlights the performative aspects of (post-)pandemic shooting, and the viewer’s situation in relation to the technology, more strongly than ever before in the series. Rather than offering a diegetic parallel to the viewer’s own voyeuristic position, as in the original *The Crash Pad*, every clip from episode 312 through 321 begins with a frontal view of one of the automated cameras’ reflective lenses. Identification in this moment can only latch onto the camera as an observer, rather than its viewpoint, confronting us with our own position as disembodied voyeurs. As such, we are allowed to be ‘sutured into the diegesis’ (Straayer 1996, 185) to a much lesser degree than in previous episodes. Even beyond the close-ups showing the cameras, the footage makes no effort to dissimulate the conditions of its production, frequently leaving tripods and mounted lights visible in the background and opting for the echoey, mushy sound of immobile room microphones over the aural closeness of body mics. This in turn creates a ‘double exposure’ of the performers, who appear not only as lovers engaging in sex acts of their choosing with and for each other, but are also explicitly shown as objects of a mediated gaze that is no longer personified on-screen. Instead, it is present only in a diffusion of technologies – lights, cameras, walkie talkies – that resists the assimilation of the voyeuristic gaze into a totalizing fantasy. Even after the Crash Pad Series returned to shooting with an on-set production crew in episode 322, the newfound emphasis on the technological mediation of voyeurism persisted, with camera operators and equipment frequently visible in shot.

Of course, the presence of such double exposure complicates any notion of authenticity, and Houston and her performers know it. Perhaps the most explicit and layered interrogation of authenticity and immersion in the Crash Pad Series occurs in episode 319, starring ACAB and Unkle Daddy. After the obligatory first shot of a mounted camera, the two performers enter the set dressed in protective gridiron gear, carrying a

cooler and football, and engaging in raucous banter suffused with technical football terms. As the scene progresses, they enact a fantasy of two aggressively 'straight' players who, after a successful match, get it on in a hotel room, all the while insisting that they are 'no homo[s]'. The (by porn standards, fairly convincing) acting and props are complemented by a second layer of pseudonymization in the dialogue, displacing the usual adult industry monikers: ACAB becomes 'Tyler' while Unkle is 'Trent'. The inclusion of the quotation marks around these pseudonyms in the film's subtitles drives home the point that we are faced with not one but two levels of mediation: firstly, edited camera footage showing two people who, secondly, are role-playing a sexual fantasy. The second level, while regularly present to some extent in previous Crash Pad episodes (ACAB and Unkle Daddy also shot a 'home improvement'-themed clip in 2019), is thrown into particularly stark relief by the self-described 'cinéma vérité style' (Pink & White Productions 2021b) of the film and its clash with the elaborate costumes and props used by the performers – a tension which also finds its way into the post-shoot interview. Here, the initial (and expected) authentication of the performers' desire ('you're my lover and my friend and everything and so, every time doing this with you [...] it's just hella fun, man' [Pink & White Productions 2021c]) is followed by a discussion not of logistical, but of epistemic and affective challenges. While Unkle talks about the difficulties of learning '[h]ow ... bros talk', ACAB addresses a more troubling gap between their 'authentic self' and their performance:

It was fun to experiment with that dialogue but ... that's not how we usually talk to ourselves and our community outside of here; like, especially, I actively try to use non-gendered words when I'm addressing people because I don't know how that's going to make them feel. So, the fact [is] that this was consensual between us and we were using it in a playful way, but I'm definitely not trying to ... 'bro' everybody. (Pink & White Productions 2021c)

ACAB's identification with the hegemonic masculinity of a football jock is neither completely disavowed nor fully embraced. Rather, it is framed as an experimental and playful 'appropriat[ion of] the language of the other' (Rancière 2003, 219) that foregrounds the non-identity of queer (in this particular case, transmasculine) subjects with the practices commonly ascribed to them in hegemonic discourse. This logic of non-identity is constitutive for the entire community that is represented in Houston's work. What unites the performers and films is not a stable configuration of bodies, ethnicities, or sexual practices, but the shared investment in breaking down what Rancière (2001) calls the 'partition of the sensible', the representational order that delineates such monolithic identities. Tellingly, CrashPadSeries.com offers no search filters for gender, race, or body type (in stark contrast to mainstream porn websites), refusing the constrictive categories of an external framework to orient what we are seeing. Approached from this angle, the authenticity of Houston's work arguably lies in its ability to represent a non-identitarian sexual community in terms of its constituents' own choosing, by having performers like ACAB speak to the experience of navigating uncomfortably ambivalent desires rather than espousing 'the idea that there is a truth of every person's sexuality and gender' (Houston 2014, 118). To tie this back to Houston's exuberant embrace of voyeurism, we could call this a voyeurism-within-community that is itself a mode of reflexivity, a way of validating and maintaining erotic diversity by watching each other watching. Indeed, Houston herself makes a similar point:

I feel like a lot of people who find *Crash Pad* are looking for validation of their own sexuality. They're, like, oh, these are possibilities for what my sexuality can be. In that sense, we create ... a portal for possibilities, or like we're *reflecting*, we're a mirror for what's going on in the community right now. (Darnell 2022; emphasis added)

Thus, in Houston's work the depiction of a queer (pornographic) community goes along with a reflexive, metapornographic queering of the voyeuristic gaze, whose point of origin is located within this community, rather than outside it.

After exhibiting her metapornographic voyeurism in the Crash Pad Series for 15 years, Houston stepped down as director in March 2022, handing over the reins to long-time collaborator Ava LaPrima. While the series has continued to release clips that are as real and hot as ever, it is Houston's work with the site that established its operating guidelines and consolidated her contribution to feminist and queer porn. Given her significant position as an alt-web pornographer, this contribution is as technological as it is aesthetic, built on a deliberate staging of the voyeuristic gaze as a techno-visual assemblage that is crucial to the queerness of Houston's oeuvre (Cruz 2016, 165). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Houston is continuing to push the boundaries of alt-porn on the web, as she expands from being a director-producer into a techno-curator committed to providing digital infrastructure through PinkLable.tv for other creators' works. This extends to her newest foray into 'powering' independent porn film festivals (including the San Francisco PornFilmFestival, which she founded) through the live-streaming capacities of her own website. With the fourth San Francisco PornFilmFestival announced for August 2023, Shine Louise Houston is set to continue growing the two possibilities she most strongly espouses: the 'incredible possibility' of queer sexuality and 'the possibilities of what this genre [of porn] is' (Darnell 2022).

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