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SuicideGirls: Bodies, Beauty and Cyberspace

MARCIA ENGLAND

Miami University

ABSTRACT

Pornography is a sensitive, but important, social subject to explore. For decades, feminists have been split over their views on the matter. While always a topic of discussion, the debate has been recently reinvigorated with the increased popularity and accessibility of the Internet. Representations and images promoted in cyberspace have a dialectical relationship with the “real” world. Geographies in cyberspace reflect and influence modern social mores. Using the website *SuicideGirls.com* as my empirical example, I discuss the complicated relationships between bodies, beauty and cyberspace. This website is both celebrated and controversial, and as such, lends an interesting case study through which to explore social geographies.

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS PAPER, I LOOK AT A SPECIFIC WEBSITE, *SuicideGirls*¹ (SG), and discuss two aspects important to media geographies: the social geographies formed by the site, and the relationships between the Internet and cultural images of beauty. SG was chosen as the object of inquiry for this article because of its pervasive presence in modern popular culture. The site has exploded into the popular culture realm beyond the Internet and has infiltrated society everywhere from the fashion to music worlds. This cyberworld has a very real and material presence.

This paper focuses on the SG website and its promoted image as “alternative” and “feminist,” exploring geographies of the body and the repercussions those geographies have on society. *SuicideGirls* became a controversial site with the departure of nearly forty models in September 2005. Once touted as “feminist” pornography by liberal press, the image of the site changed when allegations of abuse were waged by some of the former models. The portrayals of women on SG have been described as an alternative

to the buxom blonde stereotype of mainstream pornography. By featuring women with “deviant” bodies, the site was seen as having the potential to destabilize social norms of beauty. The women who model for SG are tattooed, pierced and have dyed hair of various bright hues. Their bodies can be considered “deviant” by society since they do not conform to certain social norms (see examples in Foucault 1990; Grosz 1994; Bell 1995; Sibley 1995). On this website, the “deviant” body becomes a barometer for social norms regarding beauty. Through the medium of the Internet, SG disseminates alternative portrayals of the body, although they are often framed as “deviant,” which are absorbed into modern culture and then often cease to be “deviant.”

Pornography is a complicated subject, even defining just what constitutes a pornographic image is difficult since the line between erotica and pornography is increasingly blurred and contested. Pornography is not a static concept, but it is often treated as if it is. For the purposes of this paper, pornography will not be strictly, but refers to the sexualized imagery promoted in print and various other media. As a feminist geographer, writing about pornography is problematic since pornography has been a hotly debated issue for feminists for decades (for example, see histories in Kendrick 1987; Chapkis 1997). Although discussion over the issue has waxed and waned over time, the subject remains sensitive. With the explosion of Internet pornography in the 1990s, it was brought again to the forefront of feminist debates. All sides of the debate were refreshed with new arguments regarding the exploitation of women by/in pornography.

Three feminist positions on pornography are usually expressed in these debates: ‘Anti-pornography,’ ‘liberal,’ and ‘pro-sex.’ Pornography has been framed by anti-pornography feminists through domination discourses. They argue that gender oppression is achieved through a sexuality that caters to ‘male’ appetites and desires (MacKinnon 1987, 2000; Dworkin 2000a, 2000b). Women’s bodies are seen by anti-pornography feminists as commodified and exploited by pornography. Liberal feminists see pornography as a free speech issue, combining that right with a woman’s right to use her own body as she pleases (Strossen 1996; McElroy 1997a, 1997b). Pro-sex feminists have claimed that alternative sexual practices and feminism should go hand in hand (Rubin 1984; Califia 1994; Queen 1997; Bright 2004). They also challenge the idea that pornography is simply a male desire and they argue that “women *do* look” (original emphasis, Kipnis 1993: 221).

REPRESENTATION AND THE BODY

Geographic perspectives on the pornography debates add another layer to the mix. As geographers, pornography is important to study precisely because of the issues wrapped up in politics of representation of society. Yet pornography is a subject rarely broached by geographers, feminist or otherwise (see Stansfield 1979; Papayanis 2000; Zook 2003 for exception). Williams (2004: 2) argues, “Mainstream or margin, pornography is

emphatically part of American culture." Pornography is still treated as taboo subject in academia, although use of pornography is growing every day due to the expansion of the Internet.

The study of the body in pornography is important to geographers because of the struggle over depictions of the body and what that means to culture. de Lauretis argues that "the stakes, for women, are rooted in the body" (quoted in Rose 1993: 29). Rose (1993) furthers this argument by recalling the feminist slogan "Your body is a battleground" (ibid). There is no agreement on how to treat the pornographic body. Investigating the pornographic body leads to examinations of social norms as a whole. Additionally, the study of discourses of feminism in regards to pornography is an important lens through which to view social conceptions of the body.

By looking at the body as a site of representation of social norms, geographic investigation into Internet pornography shows how portrayals of the body can influence societal ideas of beauty and attractiveness. Increasingly, the Internet is a site of exploration for geography, but interestingly, representations of images on the Internet, more specifically pornographic images, have been largely left unstudied. Geographic inquiry into Internet pornography is important not only because of the void in geographic knowledge, but because the interplay between bodies, beauty and cyberspace have something to tell us about the society in which we live.

As a subject of geographical inquiry, the body has been explored in a variety of ways ranging from the body in theory to empirics on the body (Longhurst 1995, 1997; Butler and Bowlby 1997; Nast and Pile 1998; Valentine 2000 to name but a few). Geographers have examined the body in order to gain a better understanding of social relations. Bodies, and portrayals of the body, are important sites of analysis because of the history of social constructions placed on the body. Following Douglas (1984), Pile (1996) argues, "the contours of the body are the contours of society" (186). Scholars who seek to disrupt the naturalization of the body question how constructions of the body relate to constructions of femininity. Representations of the body are necessary to study as well because it is important to acknowledge just *whose* body is being portrayed and the ramifications of that representation.

Cyberspace provides an interesting backdrop to the examination of pornography and the body since there are no 'real' bodies in cyberspace, only portrayals of bodies. In addition, there is a colliding of public and private in the world of cyber-pornography. There is a move from the private space of the bedroom to the public/private space of the Internet (Williams 2004). According to Bronski, "The explosion of private sexual fantasy into public view is a powerful political statement" (quoted in Binnie 2001: 109). The collision between public and private has traditionally been a subject for geographers, so it is remarkable that pornography, especially cyber-pornography has remained marginalized, even stigmatized, as a subject of study.

The purpose of this article is not to state whether or not pornography objectifies or oppresses women. It is, instead, to look at a specific website, SuicideGirls.com, and discuss the bodily geographies promoted by the site and by looking at those geographies, come to a better understanding of the collusion between cyberspace and the social mores. Of course, social mores and norms are constantly shifting, but there are traditional forms of beauty that have been standardized in our current mainstream society. Discourses of feminism promoted by the site help to achieve a disruption of beauty norms, yet there are those who believe that SG, as a pornography site, concretizes those same norms.

The archive for this research is comprised of two main sources: 1) primary data from SuicideGirls.com and various blogspots, and 2) textual analysis of newspaper and magazine articles. Samples were taken of SG model profiles in order to gain access to blogs. Of the over 1000 models on the site at the time of analysis, 200 profiles were examined. The samples were also taken to look at the body types of the models. Critical analysis of blogspots, newspapers and magazines provided additional context and material for this article, since models were not available for interviews by this researcher at the time of analysis. Since then, many models have left the site—making them unreachable due to their pseudonyms.

SUICIDEGIRLS: ALTERNATIVE TO THE MAINSTREAM?

According to the SuicideGirls Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), the name for the site was inspired by the Chuck Palahniuk book, *Survivor*. On the same FAQ, the reasoning behind the name is explained:

There are no dark sinister undertones. If I had known the site would be so popular then I might have thought the name out a bit more. *Suicide girls* is a term my friends and I had been using to describe the girls we saw in Portland's Pioneer Square with skateboards in one hand, wearing a Minor Threat hoodie, listening to Ice Cube on their iPods while reading a book of Nick Cave's poetry. They are girls who didn't fit into any conventional sub-culture and didn't define themselves based on musical taste like punk, metal, goth, etc. I think the only classifications right now people identify with are mainstream and outside of mainstream. That is why the site is called SuicideGirls (FAQ).

Founded in 2001, SuicideGirls.com was the brainchild of two Portland, Oregon, residents who called themselves Missy Suicide (pseudonym) and Spooky (otherwise known as Sean Suhl).

The 'origin myth' of SG is described here by Missy:

I started SuicideGirls in the summer of 2001 as an art project/experiment. Something I could be passionate about while doing corporate freelance projects. I had always loved pin-up girl photography and wanted to

photograph the girls that I knew with the same sort of control and respect the classic pin-ups were given (FAQ).

This origin of SG came into question when controversy hit the site in 2005. Many of the models said they were misled by Missy's account of the start-up of SG and were dismayed when they realized the site was co-founded by a man (more on "controversy" this below). Sicily Suicide (a model who left the site in August 2005) is quoted as saying "I was really impressed by the fact that it was run by a woman. That's what everyone told me, anyway. It was cool, because it was a bunch of girls and it seemed really communal and super-friendly" (Wilson 2006, p. 71).

SuicideGirls shows soft-core² pictures and profiles of women who have adopted goth, punk or emo styles. These styles often involve dyed hair, piercings and alternative fashions. Often described as 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) porn, the amateur models are in control of how much they show and how they pose. Missy, the main spokesperson for the site, described the aesthetic of the site, stating:

The SuicideGirls pose how they want, in what positions they choose, wearing whatever clothes they choose, and showing as much as they want to show. For all intents and purposes the models choose the images of themselves they want on the site. They aren't just bodies on the site, but whole people who leave an impression of who they are in [the members'] minds (Phillips 2002: para. 11).

The freedom of choice the models are given help to promote the 'feminist' feel of the site. The women are in charge of their own bodies and the images (until the images eventually become property of SG after being posted to the website). Additionally, Missy describes the models as not "just bodies on the site," but instead they are more than just their image. They are 'real' and 'whole' people, not just representations.

Although the owners³ of the site resist categorization, the site is often described as 'alterna-porn' or 'altporn.' Altporn often involves the featuring of bodily modifications such as tattoos, piercing, scarification, and dyed hair. While altporn has been available in magazines since the 1970s, it is more readily available now on the Internet. Websites such as SG, gloomdolls.com and NoFauxx.com were launched in the 2000s, and all feature 'alternative' models. According to *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Neva Chonin (2005: para. 3):

Suicide Girls is one of the lead players in an Internet movement known as alterna-porn. On these progressive porn Web sites founded by club kids, neo-hippies, political activists and sundry bohemians, subversive variety rules—piercings and tattoos prevail over implants and Brazilian waxes.

Other than the tattooed and pierced models, altporn is distinguished from mainstream pornography by the use of message boards and blogs to establish an online community. According to SG co-owner Sean Suhl, "If you look at the traffic on our site, only about

15 to 20 percent of the traffic goes to the pictures. The other 80 percent goes to all the other features we have, like the groups and calendars and stuff like that” (Gaynor 2003: para 9). In these online communities, participation of both the model and the viewer is encouraged. Viewers are encouraged to interact with models and become more than passive voyeurs. While interaction is not exclusive to altporn, most mainstream sites tend to encourage anonymity of both model and viewer. Members pay a minimum of \$4 for access to the “community,” though many pictures and blogs/journals are available for free. Just how many members access the site is unknown; Suhl keeps the actual membership numbers away from the media supposedly on the advice of his accountant.

In 2005, SG grew exponentially, expanding from the internet into the ‘real’ world. It is now an international sensation, a cultural bombardment of everything from video podcasts to burlesque shows to a clothing line. This influx of SG into the non-Internet world is rare for a pornography website. Members are encouraged to interact with SG in non-conventional ways for the Internet, meaning the site has moved from the private into the public with the functions (e.g. parties or get-togethers) SG throws. SG sticker and clothing are sported by not only site members, but ‘fans’ as well.

Beyond the expansion of the SG “community,” the number of models has grown as well. SuicideGirls had only 100 models in 2003 and nearly 1500 in May 2007. Missy Suicide has stated that around 6000 women a month contact her, inquiring about modeling for the site. Beyond attracting models, SG also attracts a large female audience – 43 percent of the members on the site claim to be women.

According to Missy Suicide on the site’s FAQ, many women users view the bodies of SG models as an alternative to and perhaps as ‘better’ than the stereotypical voluptuous blonde of other mainstream sites. Supposedly, they are seen as less oppressive to women because they are seen as “art,” not pornography. Missy argues that the female viewers “support” and “appreciate” the models instead of seeing them as unattainable beauty standards to which they could never live up. According to Missy, the “Baywatch” type of beauty is not seen as attractive for the women who log on to the site. That type of beauty, that type of body, are seen as buying into mainstream norms of attractiveness and sexuality, something which is opposed to the site’s origin myth.

DEVIANT BODIES?

In August 2005, SuicideGirls took down a number of photographs that portrayed bondage (actually sado-masochism of any form) or fake blood in a preemptive move. According to co-owners Missy and Olivia Suicide, they feared prosecution from U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales’ ‘war on porn.’ While the U.S. government gave no formal notice, SG owners felt they would be targeted due to loose definitions of ‘deviant’ imagery although no criminal charges were brought against SG.

Both the acts portrayed on SuicideGirls and the models themselves could be considered deviant by today’s traditional social norms. Their bodies are tattooed and

pierced, and in some cases, scarred. Their hair is dyed all hues ranging from white to black and often styled in non-traditional ways. The tattoos and piercings the models sport are seen by many of the viewers as art, not a form of deviance (although it could be argued that many of the viewers are probably modified in their own way). The bodies on SG can be seen to defy mainstream standards of attractiveness. Many of the models find this an attractive part of modeling for the site. Crimson Suicide stated on her profile her reason for modeling on the site: "So people will see that it's not only okay to look different but its FUCKIN' sexy too! [sic]"

The bodies portrayed on altporn websites such as SG are often touted as a way to destabilize traditional notions of beauty. But upon further examination, SG perhaps is not a 'liberated' and 'empowered' site as it was publicized in its initial years. Moving beyond the accusations of former models, an analysis of the models on SG reveals something interesting to those involved in the feminist debates surrounding beauty and modern society. Of the 200 models sampled for this research, only one was a plus-size woman and only two were non-Caucasian. Tomlin (2002, para. 8) describes this in her observations of SG:

[D]espite their tattoos, hair coloring, and creative piercings, [the models] fall neatly within the confines of mainstream beauty standards. Imagine giving the varsity cheerleading squad makeovers at Hot Topic, and you wouldn't be too far off. Most of the models here (and on other indie-porn sites, too) are thin, white, and traditionally beautiful. Fat girls-hell, even average plump girls-aren't Suicide Girls, and with only a couple of exceptions, neither are girls of color...there's a certain kind of hypocrisy in a site that pats itself on the back for being "different," yet seems to equate that only with being different from others featuring blond Pamela Anderson manqués.

The defiance of beauty norms is perhaps quite shallow (maybe only skin deep) rather than a liberated notion of beauty.

Online, Jessica Hopper and Julianne Shepherd (2005) wrote a scathing article examining SG, stating: "Suicide Girls' much-touted diversity includes dark-haired, tattooed, skinny white girls with lots of piercings and dark-haired, tattooed, skinny, white girls with just a few piercings." They argue that homogeneous women striking pornographic poses resemble homogeneous women striking pornographic poses. Yet there is a difference. There is no penetration allowed on SG. But interesting to note, is that many of the girls are pierced, penetrated in a semi-permanent manner. Not to mention the tattoos that are imprinted by a needle that penetrates the surface of the skin. But as Glass (2004: 18) stated,

Suicide Girls does represent a certain 'alternative' alternative within a largely homogenized industry, even if it is only skin deep. But even with their assertive poses and bold stares into the camera, Suicide Girls can't escape the

debate concerning whether this difference makes it any more empowering for the females involved.

This debate regarding empowerment is nothing new in the pornography debates. But some of the models have been very vocal in their opinions that SG is not empowering, but instead exploitative. Sicily Suicide wrote the following blog giving her thoughts on SG:

i have been ripped off and exploited by sg...fuck their shitty marketing antics! fuck their “woman-friendly” approach...JUST DON'T LIE ABOUT IT AND TRICK PEOPLE INTO BELIEVING IT'S SOMETHING ELSE!! suicide girls is NOT PUNK ROCK. suicide girls is NOT ALTERNATIVE. suicide girls is NOT WOMAN-FRIENDLY. suicide girls IS JUST ANOTHER PORN SITE....[Sean] exploited us! ...and so did missy! and all of the other spin doctor liars! i can't believe some of the shit i've seen written from those who KNOW what goes on! what is wrong with you people?!? oh yea...the same thing that was wrong with me. heh, i forgot things are a fuck of a lot different when you're either a hopeful artist or financially dependent on sg. yea, i would have defended sg tooth and nail only a few months ago...i had to experience on my own, as will you...just don't say you didn't have fair warning (Sicily 2005).

Due to model (and media) backlash, Missy created a response page called the “Trash Can.” To the charge that SG is not “woman-friendly,” Missy wrote:

I will not speak for the experience of the women who model for us, but here is some info about our practices, and you can decide for yourself. (1) Most of the photographers are women, and most of the photoshoppers are women. The people whose job it is to look at and process your application are women. Almost all of the women doing this work are, themselves, SuicideGirls on the site. (2) The extent of our photoshop work is to remove zits and do basic photo correction; we do not (as is common in the industry) replace nipples with “stock nipples” or purposely edit thighs to change their shape entirely. (3) Models choose their own photographers or they can use one of our staff photographers. They can choose their own makeup, lighting, outfits, staging, and do whatever else they want to direct the photoshoot themselves. (4) We do not badger the models to lose weight or starve themselves as is common in the industry. And despite the commonly held perception, there is a range of different body types and sizes on the site. (5) We moderate our community to actively discourage a “boy’s club” mentality, where women are made to feel unwelcome (Trash Can).

In this response, Missy addresses a number of concerns facing SG. She discusses topics that range from the Photo-Shopping of bodies to issues of empowerment. Bodies are not altered in the publishing process, but instead are left ‘natural’ to celebrate the difference of the site, it would seem. Missy describes the process of modeling in order to elucidate it and make it seen as liberating as possible for the models. These issues become even

more important for SG to deal with when the criticism from former models floods the Internet (as shown by Sicily's earlier blog).

LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT

The gloss that has allowed SG to shine over the past few years was removed in September 2005 when nearly forty models (as opposed to the usual ten to fifteen that leave a month) left the site. The complaints lodged against the site by some of the models range from verbal abuse to being 'archived'⁴ without their consent or knowledge. Another of the rumored reasons was the nearly invisible counterpart to Missy—Sean Suhl. He is described as a 'puppeteer' by some of the former models, which many of the departed models feel is contrary to the feminist ethic the site promotes (although it does raise questions of gender bias and complicates feminist ethics).

To survey the recent 'mood' of the models, model profiles were sampled in May 2007. Each profile asks thirteen questions that the models answer. They range from asking their age to asking about their virginity. SuicideGirls models are asked to describe their current thoughts on SG by regularly updating their profile on the site. Most say "I love it." In a sampling of the women on the site, 60 percent out of 200 said they love the site, with 20 percent saying they liked it. Only 2 percent stated that they hated it and 18 percent left the question unanswered. The profile also asks why they did SG. Answers range from "I've wanted to be naked on the Internet since I was seventeen" (Abjectly Suicide) to "because i thought it would be funny" [sic] (Abbie Suicide). Yiyi responded that she modeled "to help destroy the social norms that stifle women's sexuality in Taiwan" [sic]. The answer "because I could" was often repeated as well.

The models on the site also post blogs, which are called journals by SG. Some of the journals detail the daily activities of the model, while others feature art or poetry. Anti-SG blogs are removed by the site upon discovery, but some stay up without detection (at least, for a while). Shellie Suicide's last blog and profile showed her unhappiness with SG and her choice to model for the site. Although she wanted to get "off the site," she was archived without knowledge. Her last post was the reason she was archived. In the SG FAQ, Missy Suicide basically states that freedom of speech does not apply to SuicideGirls.com.⁵ Ex-model blogs and postings on external sites, including MySpace.com and LiveJournal.com, were also taken down. Blogs posted under "The Real Story" have been removed from gloomdolls.com pending legal action from SG. SG is also suing gloomdolls.com for posting damaging, behind-the-scenes confessions of an ex-model that the company says breach a confidentiality agreement the model signed.

Twenty-three models have responded to allegations of the former models (Dia Suicide and Sicily Suicide have been interviewed by outside media the most) and sang the praises of SG in their journals.⁶ They primarily respond to charges of verbal abuse by SG co-founder Suhl, but many talk about the "freedom" they experience in their modeling.

I joined SG just over a year ago. I was rummaging the net one afternoon, looking for yet another modelling job to pay my gas bill with, and I came across SuicideGirls.com. I joined right away, and throughout the year it gave me quite a few creative and fabulous jobs, much more than just the modelling work. Firstly, I got complete creative freedom in interpreting my sexuality in pictures. There was no greasy old man of a photographer to tell me to fucking smile and not sneer, what to wear and how to pose. I could take photos in weird outfits, makeup, settings, and tell sick stories in my photosets without being creatively censored by those who pay me for the pictures - SuicideGirls.com...SuicideGirls.com is not yet another piece of porn conglomerate empire with a sleazy porn magnate behind an army of fake tanned silicone tits!...I know that joining SG was a life-changing experience to many girls, especially punky tattooed dolls in small towns and countries where they would be isolated and ghettoised as freaks, but once on the site they suddenly turn into superstars loved and admired for their quirkiness, individuality and unique beauty [sic]. (Manko)

THE DEBATE ON SUICIDEGIRLS

The 'liberated' philosophy voiced by many of the current SG models has caused the site to be both a media darling and a site of controversy. The debate on whether or not SG is feminist is relevant to geographical studies of the body. On one hand, the body that was once seen as "deviant" could now be recognized as a "work of art," as some claim. On the other hand, most of the models are thin, white and conventionally attractive. The issue of whether or not SG is a feminist site has been debated over and over in numerous articles written about the site.

In an AlterNet.org interview with Andi Zeigler, "sexpert" Susie Bright weighs in on her opinion of SG (Zeigler 2006). Responding to a question regarding SG's altporn status, Bright states: "It's like saying *The Cosby Show* is the Black Power movement. It's not a collective. It wasn't started with people who had stars in their eyes about girls doing it for themselves! That's a myth." Bright's interview sparked a number of comments on the blogspot AlterNet. In response to Bright, a "mom in minneapolis" posted this blog under the screen name "jas":

I just visited the Suicide Girls website after reading the alternet article [meaning Bright's article]...I'm supposing...that these young women are rebelling against society's "exploitation" if you will of women and sex. At its foundation, Suicide Girls is also a form of exploitation; it's just that the SG girls have dyed black hair, black fingernails, and pierced nipples instead of long blonde locks and breast implants. I can't really find any clear distinction between playboy centerfolds and SG girls. I hope someone can help me out here (jas 2006).

Here again we are drawn back to the Playboy narrative of the buxom blonde and the deviance of the SG models from that archetype. But also here is the notion that SG models are also being exploited. "Jedmunds" in his blog entitled "Throwing a Tattoo on

a Sexpot Makes... a Tattooed Sexpot" quoted another blogger, who gave his opinion of SG:⁷

[P]eople just fell for the bullshit marketing. They were dying for someone to make naked chicks ok for them to look at and not feel like they were looking at exploited women. People like to look at naked people, but they don't want to feel guilty, so the Invisible Hand marketed them some Porn Diet Light Zero™ lots of spicy flavor, none of the annoying guilt calories (Captain Trollypants, quoted in Jedmunds 2005)

Missy Suicide in an article for *Jane* magazine had this to say on the feminist/exploitation debate: "SuicideGirls isn't for everyone. We never claimed to be the feminist end-all, be-all for everyone. It's an alternative community, and some girls do feel empowered by their sexuality. But we never heralded ourselves as feminist crusaders or anything like that" (Wilson 2006: 135). Yet in a previous article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Missy claimed the site was feminist: "It's about self-expression and having fun. It's very feminist. Why? Because it's feminist for women to be exactly who we are, and we come in all packages and shapes and attitudes" (King 2005: para. 7). This is not to say that all feminists need to be crusading, but in examining these two quotes, there is a tension. Missy seems to shirk away from the feminist label at times, while embracing it at others.

Both current and former models have a lot to say on the 'feminist myth' surrounding SG. Sicily, one of the most outspoken former models, took on the origin myth of the site in one of her blogs and described how she felt that it was misleading to many models.

I really feel like my points have been taken WAY off course in regards to sg, it's not about feminism because i think that all porn stars should be feminists. in fact, i hate the boxy label of "feminist". it seems like separatist thinking to me. if you have to fucking label it...i think i'd rather go with "humanist" (even that's a little restrictive for my liking). this was never about feminism until sg portrayed themselves as a site that was empowering to women. SG ARE THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE MADE IT ABOUT FEMINISM! SG ARE THE PEOPLE THAT HAVE MADE IT ABOUT "DIY" AND "PUNK ROCK"! not me. not anyone else. if sg didn't have a WOMAN fronting the site as if SHE created it, i don't think feminism would have EVER some into play. if sean suhl came out like fucking larry flynt and made himself more visible on the site, i don't think many of the girls would have ever joined the site (at least not those who were misled and cared about all that grassroots, empowering punk rock shit). if this sort of press doesn't allude to feminism and empowerment, then go ahead can call me fucking crazy [sic]! (sicily)

Charlie, a SG model, posted her thoughts on feminism on her blog:

...Own your fucking sexuality, that's up to you, and your self knowledge... the more power we give to abstract article "the men", the more power it'll have over you, so take responsibility for your shit (note that this rant is directed towards a dead woman, yeah, I'm a jerk).

Charlie is responding to anti-sex feminists like Andrea Dworkin, who was a major voice against pornography in feminist debates. For Charlie, feminism is about owning one's sexuality and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Another SG model, Bree, posts her view on the debate, though she's promoting some repressive ideas about feminism with her "fem nazi" remark:

I have been working on ideas for a book about feminism, and a play called ROOAARR: The new kind of feminism...haha. OH NO I am turning into a FEM NAZI! Except I love being a woman, don't want to look like a boy, and I don't believe that competing in a mans world is feminism...it's all about changing the way men think about women!!! Come on guys!!! Girls are fucking hot, driven, intelligent, able and willing...not to mention they have those fabulous tits! It's all about worshipping women without degradation, or ownership [sic]! (Bree)

Missy too has responded to questions as to whether the site is exploitative, saying:

Sex and sexuality is nothing for a woman to be ashamed of, but for a long time it felt that way, even in feminism. It's that old attitude that anytime you take your clothes off you're being objectified or exploited. I think the women on Suicide Girls are brave in saying, "I'm confident, I'm intelligent, and I don't have a problem sharing my sexuality with the world. This is what a real body looks like, and it's beautiful." This is what should be celebrated (King 2005).

Not only is freedom a desired entity by SG models, but protection as well. Nixon described how Missy works as sort of a mother hen, all while allowing the girls to "express their sexuality:"

I feel very empowered by SuicideGirls because it lets me express my sexuality without anyone telling me how to do it. I have freedom with how I want to express myself. And if I have a problem with a member, all I have to do is e-mail Missy and they're off the site within a half-hour. She protects us (Wilson 2006: 72).

When asked by *Jane* magazine if a heterosexual, soft-core site could be empowering, Voltaire Suicide responded: "I wouldn't say any of this is empowering. How is selling your pussy online empowering?" (Wilson 2006: 135). Hopper and Shepard (2005: para. 14) take on the empowerment debate in their review of SG's take on feminism:

Suicidegirls.com hinges itself on the idea that there is no male gaze, that pornography can exist outside the bounds of subject/object relations, that there is no soft-focus power imbalance inherent in paying to look at naked girls. Behind this facade, convenient principles of second-wave feminism are folded into convenient principles of "fuck me feminism"-the ideals of independence and self-support are melded to "empowerment via self-exploitation and aesthetic control." Suicidegirls.com uses tattoos and piercings as shorthand for the real-life ethics of punk rock, and its feminism is similarly superficial.

Its members and models are led to believe they're dismantling the master's house; in fact, their photographs and membership dues have helped build it.

Another model on the site has her opinion, making the issue more complex than it is usually represented. Digdug Suicide stated:

I'm conflicted about whether it's truly empowering or not. It's not a black or white issue for me. If it's empowering to them when they shoot and present the pictures, it's hard to think of it being empowering when some guy in Omaha is looking at the pictures and jacking off (Glass 2004: para 13-16).

As Digdug states, whether or not SuicideGirls is empowering lies in the eye of the beholder. Empowerment versus exploitation is not the point. To the current and former models, the debates have real effects for they are the ones being empowered/exploited. Their bodies are the ones at the crux of the debate. Whether a body was considered 'deviant' became the crucial moment. If the bodies were seen as different from the norm, then the site was viewed as empowering and liberating. If the bodies were seen as part of the larger homogeneous pornography culture, then the site was seen as oppressive and exploitative.

THE SPACES OF SUICIDEGIRLS

The Internet is crucial to the dissemination of SuicideGirls materials and ideologies. Without the spaces provided by the Internet, SuicideGirls would most likely be limited in its scope as a small-scale pornography industry. This, of course, can only be speculated upon since the Internet does play such a huge role in creating the 'community' of SuicideGirls (including both viewers and models).

The social community of SG is important to revisit as it differs from that of more mainstream pornography, including both print and Internet. The community rejects on some level the anonymity of Internet pornography; it promotes interactivity; and it encourages the amateurization of production of sexual images. In addition, there is increasingly more communication and interactivity between models and viewers due to technological advances. The communal spaces of SG additionally open up an area where it is not taboo to view or to be viewed. Webcams and dialoguing programs that allow instantaneous communication between people allow viewers to direct models and models to interface with viewers. The 'mystique' of the model is broken down and the viewer becomes even more integrated into the fantasy. This is not to ignore the anonymity of the viewer in most cases. The purveyor of pornography is still largely in control of who sees his/her activities, while this is not the case of the model. I would argue that this uneven relationship contributes to the expansion of pornography because one can sample Internet pornography at any given time without any one else knowing (of course, remnants will remain on the hard drive—so the secret may not be completely secure).

The Internet also opens up a space for the dissenting voices of the departed Suicide Girls. While some use more conventional media like print magazine interviews to state their discontent with the site, the overwhelming majority uses various blogs to tell their stories. Blogs help to shape the cyberspaces—whether directly or indirectly—related to SG. The blogosphere, the social networking of blogs, is marked by fluidity and by temporal nodes that state one's voice at one specific moment in time. Opinions obviously fluctuate over time as do blogs, but a key thing to note is that the Internet becomes more of an interactive community, one where multiple people can sound off on a subject or an image at any given moment in time. There is a sense of communal space as Internet users work together to shape the blogosphere.

Additionally, the collision of public and private spaces becomes visible in the study of pornography. Public and private spaces collide when 'private' parts become public viewing material. There is an elision of the divide between private acts and public space when something that is theoretically meant for private consumption becomes part of a public identity. This can be seen through acts such as modeling for pictures that will be consumed by a greater public or by the participation in the SG community (attending social functions, wearing SG paraphernalia, and so on).

Finally, the bodily geographies portrayed on SuicideGirls can open up spaces of dialogue regarding norms of beauty. The bodies of SG models *are* different from those that one sees when looking at most pornographic media be they Internet, video or print. From a geographical perspective, they lend a new lens through which to read spaces of the body. While many opponents state that the models on the site are just derivations of traditional standards of beauty, those derivations can help to destabilize traditional notions of beauty otherwise touted by more mainstream pornography.

CONCLUSION

Kitchin (1998) argues that cyberspace creates "new social spaces" that do not necessarily reflect the "formal qualities of geographic spaces" (386). While cyberspace has been theorized as a social space that is free from the limitations of the body since there are no 'real bodies' in cyberspace, that claim needs to be tweaked a bit when discussing the world of Internet pornography. While the bodies in cyberspace are images and can only be images, they are meant to mirror and reflect bodies in the real world. While many will respond to that by arguing that pornography is based on fantasy, dominated by images of airbrushed models with surgically 'enhanced' bodies, SuicideGirls actively claims to break that mold stating that the site shows what 'real' women look like.

Geographers need to further investigate the role of the media, especially a medium as popular and accessible as the Internet, in the formation and construction of geographical realities. Donna Haraway (1988) argues that visual technologies influence social power relations and are capable of producing social differences and hierarchies while positioning themselves as not part of that equation. This leads to a subterfuge in

which social relations are not elucidated as social constructions, but instead as a natural outcome.

As social mores are shifting, society is becoming increasingly infiltrated by sex and sexualized imagery. As a society, the Internet, including Internet pornography, is changing how we view each other and ourselves. What this means is that we are at a precipitous time in our culture today where we can reevaluate social standards regarding bodies, beauty and cyberspace.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Actual website address is <http://www.suicidegirls.com>.

² Co-owner and co-founder Sean Suhl prefers the term 'pin-up' stating, "People always want to call us porn, but I think if wasn't on the Internet, if it was a magazine that had almost exactly the same things we have now with the articles and the interviews and the pinup photos, I think they'd be much more understanding of it. But when you see nudity on the web, you immediately say it's a porn site. We think of it as a little pinup community" (Gaynor, 2003, para 8-9).

³ The site is currently co-owned by four people, Missy Suicide, Sean Suhl, Olivia Suicide (a model) and Olivia's husband who is known as "s5."

⁴ Archival of models allows viewer to see the photo sets produced by the models, but freezes all access (by both the model and the viewer) to journals.

⁵ Additionally, the site has a zero tolerance policy regarding misogynistic language on their bulletin boards.

⁶ Their testimonials are posted at <http://suicidegirls.com/trash/testimonials/>.

⁷ A blogspot located at <http://3bulls.blogspot.com>.

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