This book is a collection of papers by (mostly) Canadian feminists, whose aim is to provide a critique of feminist 'anti-pornography theory' (Snitow) and then indicate what actions this implies for feminists. The contributors are unanimous in the view that "difficulties and contradictions notwithstanding, for women freedom lies not in accepting censorship, but in repudiating it" (Burstyn, Introduction). In light of the critique of feminist anti-pornography theory the authors advocate how feminists (and men who support them) ought to proceed in dealing with the thorny issue of pornography -- an issue Callwood sees as having produced a schism within the feminist movement. The contributors (fourteen in all) are lawyers, academics, filmmakers, writers/journalists, and artists.

Generally, the articles in this volume speak from different perspectives (e.g., Callwood on Civil liberties, King on Ontario Censorship practice, Granou on artists' experience) to common themes of feminist regression and the need for more cogent analyses of the meaning and effects of sexually explicit productions (in all their varieties) -- an adjunct of a firmly grounded sexual politics.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the debate on the issue of pornography, especially in the present context, aptly described elsewhere by Chris Bearchell as one of "moral panic." The climate of panic is likely an expression of what many of the contributors identify as a false feminist analysis of (and practice concerning) pornography. But in addition, the moral panic is made up of conservative reactions which identify pornography as impugning the sacrosanctity of patriarchal family organization.

For feminists the latter perspective is anathema, however, a coalition of sorts has been established, e.g., inasmuch as feminists Dworkin and MacKinnon have been influential in drafting municipal legislation in the United States on the basis of poorly supported and overstated claims about the consequences of viewing pornography (described by Duggan, Hunter and Vance in "False Promises: Feminist Anti-pornography Legislation in the U.S.," as well as by other contributors).
As these (and other) authors point out, it is the agenda of conservative forces that becomes transmuted into censorious practice. The goal is the same for feminists and conservatives: eradicate pornography. However, it is the local ('State') institutional organization and practice that establishes what could constitute obscenity. It is here where the price of this coalition is felt by feminists -- judgments about what is 'pornographic', i.e., what is considered obscene, swallows up feminist artistic and erotic productions, as well as those of various sexual minorities; censorship become a method of social exclusion and control, being directed at dissenting groups in society (e.g., King's and Granou's articles on Ontario censorship practices). The consequences of this coalition indicate that something like a step backward (for feminism) has taken place.

This backfiring is understood, in addition, as a misapplication of feminist energies. Many of the contributors allude to how feminists have been sidetracked away from concentrating their efforts on more fundamental social change, especially in institutional and economic arenas. Burstyn's concluding article provides a more detailed overview of the work feminists must do in light a repudiation of the censorship strategy. These include: efforts directed to expand sex education, artists expressing in their media depictions of sexuality that would assert a pluralistic and egalitarian conception as well as a critique of alienated sexuality, the achievement of reforms of the State which would result in "some limits on commercial access to and monopoly over the public arena," including taxation of commercial media whose revenues would be earmarked to support noncommercial undertakings. Burstyn's recommendations extend also to establishing broad based reforms and organized responses in four areas, seeking to establish movement in the direction of equality: reforms of laws and practices that stigmatize prostitutes, as well as empowering sex workers and providing alternatives to the alienation of sex work; action recommended to achieve economic independence for women and youth, which feminists know only too well; action recommended to assert the reproductive and erotic rights of women and sexual minorities, also well known among feminists; finally, she indicates necessary attitudinal and legal changes to establish sexual rights for children and youth.

The undermining of feminist goals represents one clue to the deficiency of the censorship strategy. These hindrances, it seems, have also provoked a critical appraisal of the logic and evidence that constitutes anti-pornography theory. Included in an appendix is an excellent twenty-three page review and overview of research relevant to the current debate about pornography. This review by sociologist Thelma McCormack was originally prepared in 1983 for the Metropolitan Toronto Task Force on Violence Against Women. The report was disregarded by a Task Force subcommittee, apparently because its conclusions did not conform to the assumptions of Task Force members (the latter is implied but not directly stated). (The United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography [1970] suffered a similar appraisal by then President Richard Nixon, who publicly repudiated its conclusions).
McConnack's overview is comprehensive, yet succinctly covers the scholarly research to date. She points out that little research has been directed toward analysis of the effects of pornography and that research done suggests no more than that the "use of pornography has become widespread and that it stimulates sexual activity and sexual fantasy but does not alter established sexual practices" (p. 191). The other related areas of research are studies of aggression, sexual offenders, media influence and aggression and pornography combined. Scrutiny of the research does not bear out the "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice" maxim: neither a direct nor an indirect causal link can be established between soft or hard core pornography use and rape.

One difficulty I have with this paper is that McCormack proposes that "much of the research itself can be described as having a sexist bias" (p. 198), in which case it becomes difficult to accord much authority to the conclusions she reaches. Greater attention to this issue would have helped clarify how or where this bias is operative in the research, in addition to identifying to what degree it impacts on the veracity of results.

One particularly welcome feature of this collection of essays is that the contributors address the conception of pornography in a more thorough and honest way than many of their predecessors. Previously, feminist anti-pornography theory has on the one hand attacked attempts to specify what pornography could be said to cover. I presume this tack derives from the fact that there are many interpretative contexts and hence many vantage points -- theoretically and practically -- from which to judge sexually explicit materials, and these pose an ideological threat to anti-pornography theory.

One move in dealing with distasteful symbolism is to line up theory and practice: the practice? -- censorship; the theory? -- pure slight of hand. The theoretical maneuver here is to add more wood to the fire: say pornography is more than rasping on the sensibilities (i.e., resides only in the private sphere where freedom of speech and access apply), say it causes physical and/or psychological injury (i.e., situate pornography in the public sphere and identify it as the locus of general harm). This elevates pornography to an issue of sanctionable public morality that is ideologically defineable and actionable by censorship adherents. But to conceive of some sort of global eradication of commercially distributed pornography (the main target) requires that adherents collect in an overly simplistic, i.e., sophistic, fashion a vast and variegated set of sexually explicit materials.

The feminist film, "Not A Love Story," represents the quintessence of this sophistic procedure of collection: show depictions of physical violence against women in pornography, claim all pornography shares an identity with this form in being essentially violent, then work back and collect physically non-violent forms of porn, asserting that the
latter are, if not symbolic representations of "violations" of women’s bodies, then invitations to such violation. The next move, adequately prepared for now, is to connect sexual assault to porn viewing. To give way on this connection is to lose purchase on public policy definition and action. As the contributors point out though, most sexually explicit materials commercially available simply do not possess the power and influence that this view argues they have.

On the other hand, feminists have adopted quite strict definitions of pornography. Sociologist Jillian Ridington’s Association for Women and the Law (1983) discussion paper contains a definition which attempts to be definitive: "Pornography is a presentation, whether live, simulated, verbal, pictorial, filmed or videotaped, or otherwise represented, of sexual behaviour in which one or more participants are coerced, overtly or implicitly, into participation; or are injured or abused physically or psychologically; or in which an imbalance of power is obvious, or implied by virtue of the immature age of any participant or by contextual aspects of the presentation, and which such behaviour can be taken to be advocated or endorsed" [emphasis added by Kostash]. As Kostash points out however, "[b]y this definition, what in popular culture, in elite culture, in advertising, in best sellers, in movies, in all those places where heterosexual coupling is portrayed or implied, where the turn-on is psychological, where an imbalance of power is of the essence in the message, what is not pornographic?" (p. 34).

It is precisely here that we run up against what Bearchell has called the "eroticization of everyday life," and what many of the contributors identify as a kind of continuity between the sexually explicit (e.g., hard/soft core porn) and the sexually implicit (e.g., advertising). Symbolically, an identical message can be communicated by both yet it is the explicit production that is set out for proscription. There are a number of implications to this line of thinking: first, that explicitness per se is morally repellent (which the contributors reject), and second, that a move to censor explicit depictions of sexuality feminists find unpalatable, puts women back in a position where they are being protected (a scenario they also reject).

Men who support feminists will likely feel more comfortable with the version of feminism expounded in the pages herein. Anti-pornography theory posits and oversimplification of the relation of men and women: "we hypothesize a monolithic enemy, a timeless, universal, male sexual brutality" (Snitow, p. 113). Men and women become "collapsed into a false unity, the brotherhood of the oppressors, the sisterhood of the victims" (p. 113). This determination extinguishes the possibility of constructive engagement between men and women, or relinquishes men to a subordinate or peripheral status in relation to women's everyday lives. Surely no recognizably 'equal' relationship can be brought into being under the auspices of such a world-view.
With the exception of McCormack's review, the eleven essays in *Women Against Censorship* are not academic in style or intent. They are "chronicles of real events and experiences by women involved in the processes they describe" (Burstyn, p. 2). While a few of the essays are occasionally dubious in the claims they advance, they work, taken as a whole, establishes convincing grounds for feminists to re-evaluate and reconstitute their analyses of pornography. Pornography ought to be viewed as a symptom of patriarchal social organization, rather than as a cause of it. Moreover, anti-pornography theory (and its advocacy of censorship) reflects rage and frustration that a feminist agenda has been slow in implementation or curtailed in the face of conservative politics. However, as Burstyn (p. 156) points out, rage, fear and frustration represents shaky ground for the generation of both theory and social policy.