

Unearthing “New” Eroticisms: Feminist Theory as Transformational in “Aberrant” Sexual Desires and Practices

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Abstract

This paper examines three elements of female sexuality: the clitoral orgasm, lesbianism, and feminist pornography. All three of these elements have traditionally been viewed as deviant in hegemonic discourse. Over the years, feminist theory and practices have transformed (or are transforming) each element from aberrant sites of desire to new modes of feminist knowledges. The female orgasm and lesbian identities were once “new” knowledge within feminism, and now feminist pornography emerges as an entirely reconceptualized way of exploring women’s desires, sexuality, and eroticism. With the aid of Elizabeth’s Grosz’s essay “The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges,” this paper demonstrates how feminist theory has served in re-imagining female sexual desires, practices, and identities.

Keywords: feminism, sexuality, feminist theory, orgasm, lesbian, pornography

Sexuality has often been a site of “normative” and “deviant” behaviours. Sexuality, sexual desires, and sexual practices have been socially constructed to condition the ways in which we view ourselves, and the ways in which we view others. Our most basic understandings of identity are inextricably linked to sexuality. Female sexualities have been a particularly contentious site when considering the notions of “acceptable” and “deviant” desires and practices. Patriarchal ideologies have strong roots in the portrayal and understandings of women’s bodies and their supposedly

“appropriate” embodied sexualities. In this paper, I explore three aspects of female eroticism that have been divisive in feminist theory and practice, as well as in hegemonic discourse: the female orgasm, lesbian existences, and pornography. I will map the ways in which each selected element of female eroticism have evolved in conjunction with feminist theory, transforming from “aberrant” sites of desire into new modes of feminist knowledge and practice. Ultimately, this paper argues feminist porn has opened up a subversive space that encourages women to embrace their

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sexual agency. Porn is no longer just an instrument that inherently oppresses women, but has become a tool to evoke embodied desires and reclaim representations of female sexuality. In this sense, feminist pornography has become a site of resistance against the dominant stereotypical portrayals of women; an erotic space that women have reclaimed as their own.

'The Geography of Her Pleasure'

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the female orgasm was linked with "proper" femininity and women's health. During a time when hysteria was a commonly diagnosed ailment in women, doctors used vibrators on their patients until they climaxed to cure them.¹ The female orgasm functioned as a means of treatment for the emotionally and mentally unwell woman. In 1905, Sigmund Freud connected the female orgasm to women's health in another way. He postulated clitoral orgasms were an "immature" representation of female sexuality, while vaginal orgasms represented "maturity."² In his psychoanalytic theory of female sexuality, Freud referred to the process as a transfer: "If the transfer was not complete and the clitoris remained the center of a woman's sexuality, she ran the risk of suffering such psychological problems as penis envy, hostility toward men, hysteria, and neurotic discontent."³ Many feminists have acknowledged Freud's inaccurate analysis of women's sexuality. Luce Irigaray comments on the binary of female sexuality proposed by Freud in her book "The Sex Which Is Not One": "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters... thus the opposition between 'masculine' clitoral activity and 'feminine' vaginal passivity,

an opposition which Freud – and many others – saw as stages, or alternatives, in the development of a sexually 'normal' woman, seems rather too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality."⁴ "Healthy" and "normal" femininity has been inextricably tied to the type of orgasm a woman could achieve. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo discusses the instability of the concept "femininity": "Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity ... female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement.'"⁵ Both Irigaray and Bordo's insights reveal the way in which the female body has been a site for scrutiny and opinion, as well as a site often measured against the universal standard: masculinity. For women, the external regulation of medical discourse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used the orgasm as a powerful means to control femininity and "healthy" sexuality.

In the 1930s and '40s, Austrian-American Freudian psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch continued research on female sexuality and the vaginal orgasm.⁶ Deutsch popularized the notion of "the feminine woman" stating that they "adapt themselves to their partners and understand them. They are the loveliest and most unaggressive of helpmates and they want to remain in that role... sexually they are easily excited and rarely frigid... they demand love and ardent desire, finding in these a satisfying compensation for the renunciation of their own active desires."⁷ This version of female sexuality posited by leading researchers and doctors of Deutsch's time renders the female body helpless and dependent. Bordo discusses the same phenomena, stating, "The nineteenth-century

¹ Betty Dodson, "We Are All Quite Queer," *Journal of Bisexuality* 4, no. 3/4 (2004): 160.

² Jane Gerhard, "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm is American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 452.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Hogarth Press, 1905) quoted in Jane Gerhard, "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm is American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 453.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, "From The Sex Which Is Not One," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 260.

⁵ Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity from Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 460.

⁶ Gerhard, "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm is American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," 454.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 456.

'lady' was idealized in terms of delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and a charmingly labile and capricious emotionality."⁸ Furthermore, the term "frigidity" was widely used to describe women who did not fit neatly into "normative" constructions of female sexuality. Gerhard states, "Frigidity thus became a label and a diagnosis that defined how much sexual desire a woman must have and in what kinds of sexual behaviour she must engage to be 'healthy.'"⁹ For decades, this way of thinking permeated dominant Western medical discourses regarding female sexuality. While clitoral orgasms were viewed as deviant, vaginal orgasms were considered "normal" and the quintessential symbol of healthy female sexuality.

In 1970, Anne Koedt published "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." Considered a feminist classic, Koedt discusses the vaginal orgasm as a great fabrication, originating from psychoanalysis and Freudianism. She argues that the medical label "frigidity" caused women to feel inadequate: "The worst damage was done to the mental health of women who either suffered silently with self-blame or flocked to psychiatrists looking desperately for the hidden and terrible repression that had kept from them their vaginal destiny."¹⁰ Koedt continues by suggesting that the clitoris is the only area where a woman can actually achieve an orgasm, for the vagina's functions are primarily related to reproductive capabilities, such as menstruation, holding semen, and giving birth.¹¹ Koedt's groundbreaking ideas were politically charged, rooted in radical feminist ideologies and "extremist" views. Gerhard discusses "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" and comments on the way in which Koedt's theorizing opened up a site for diversity in female sexuality:

To break out of male-defined notions of female pleasure, Koedt and others embraced the clitoris as a potentially unsituated site of sexual expression in women. Koedt was one of the first feminists to theorize clitoral sexuality as a form of sexual expression tied neither solely to heterosexuality nor homosexuality but to a kind of female sexuality that lay beyond or beneath social designations. The "discovery" of the clitoris as potentially unaligned to any specific sexual identity proved enormously useful to feminist sexual theories and constituted a major break in American sexual thought.¹²

While some of Koedt's arguments are severe – suggesting women can only achieve orgasm through clitoral stimulation – her essay is an important contemporary text that promoted sexual autonomy for women during a time dominated by oppressive notions of female sexuality. The clitoral orgasm unearthed a female sexuality centered on empowerment and agency, and was an important outcome of the sexual revolution. Irigaray reminds us, however, that there is not just one central corporeal 'space' for female pleasure: "... *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere... the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused sameness."¹³ Today, the clitoral orgasm is a widely accepted component of female eroticism.

'Lesbians are Not Women' and Other Queer Anecdotes

Lesbian bodies and relationships have been another site of "deviancy" in the realm of female sexuality. Although lesbian identities as we know them today were uncommon during the 19th century, romantic friendships were extremely popular among young women. These friendships were generally described as nonsexual, however it is important to acknowledge "the 'not said' and the 'not seen'

⁸ Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity from Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body," 461.

⁹ Gerhard, "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm is American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," 457.

¹⁰ Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 186.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹² Gerhard, "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm is American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," 450.

¹³ Irigaray, "From The Sex Which Is Not One," 263.

as conceptual tools for the writing of lesbian history.¹⁴ Sexual orientation as an identity is a social construction, shifting and evolving through space and time. Canadian sociologist Gary Kinsman explains the historical context of social organization: "Identities such as heterosexual, homosexual, and lesbian are socially created."¹⁵ Kinsman continues by stating, "Because of the socially organized 'private' or 'personal' character of intimate sexual relations there has been little public record of same-gender sex aside from the 'deviant' or 'criminal' behaviour found in police records, government reports, newspaper articles, medical and psychiatric discourse, and sex advice literature."¹⁶ Notions of sexual deviance have been repeatedly linked to lesbian identities and cultures, forcing their existences underground. Canadian queer historian Cameron Duder examines the lives of lesbians before the feminist movement and sexual revolution. His work provides a rich historical account of women who participated in same-sex relations in the early 20th century by both examining letters written between lesbian couples, as well as interviews and oral histories of lesbian women. Duder exclaims:

For some women... whatever gains there might have been in more open relationships with women were dramatically outweighed by the potential losses, and they kept their sexuality very much private. For the most part, the women [researched] lived in the same way: they maintained a respectable façade at work and in the company of family and engaged in relationships with women in secrecy. They were discreet in their same-sex activities and sought to hide their relationships because of the negative impact that exposure would inevitably have had on their family and work relationships.¹⁷

Before the emergence of lesbian feminism and the sexual revolution, women in romantic relationships with women were less visible in mainstream culture.

Lesbians, and the associated abject desires and practices of lesbians, have and continue to be viewed in opposition to the heterosexual "standard." The group Radicalesbians from the 1970s discusses the difference between straight women and lesbians: "... a lesbian is not considered a 'real woman.' And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation – which is to say when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a 'woman' is to get fucked by men."¹⁸ Lesbianism, as a constructed identity based on patriarchal notions, directly threatens the patriarchy's capacity, as Bunch points out, "Our very strength as lesbians lies in the fact that we are outside the patriarchy; our existence challenges its life."¹⁹ Since the gay and lesbian liberation movement in the 1970s, lesbian identities and communities have become more visible and integrated into 'heterosexual' society. Lesbianism, however, is still understood as aberrant in comparison to the established standard of straight women. American feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich reveals a common interpretation of lesbian women in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts: "If we think of heterosexuality as *the* natural emotional and sensual inclination for women, lives such as these are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived."²⁰ Despite becoming more accepted within current North American culture, lesbian existences are still regarded as the substandard foil to the "normal" framework of desire – heterosexuality.

Lesbian existences have been an important topic for feminist theory since the sexual liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s. Many 20th century feminists and thinkers

¹⁴ Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?," *Radical History Review* 60 (1994): 58.

¹⁵ Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada*, (Montreal: Black Rose Book, 1987), 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ Cameron Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁸ Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 198-99.

¹⁹ Charlotte Bunch, "Not for Lesbians Only," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 214.

²⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 293.

such as Charlotte Bunch, Monique Wittig, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Mary Daly have conceptualized the various and complex identities, cultures, politics, and eroticisms associated with lesbianism. Rich points out the very unique, situated experience that comes along with lesbian existence: "... the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences."²¹ While some feminists, like Rich, take more of an essentialist stance on the topic of lesbianism in terms of gender, others view it from a post-structuralist lens. Wittig is wary of gender categories altogether when she asserts "... 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems... lesbians are not women."²² Rich and Wittig view lesbian identities within different parameters, as Rich's ideas reinforce the gender binary by emphasizing 'the female experience', and Wittig attempts to break down the binary by calling into question the very categories of gender altogether.

Contemporary thought surrounding lesbian existence has evolved into the emerging scholarship of queer studies. Theorists such as Elspeth Probyn, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith (Jack) Halberstam are trailblazers in queer theory. Butler's work on gender performativity is a crucial contribution to queer theory: "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."²³ Although Butler is attempting to break down the strict categories assigned to genders and sexualities, her work has helped to open up safe and inclusive spaces that in turn foster the emergence of lesbianism as a more widely accepted existence.

'Good for Her' Pornography

Contemporary knowledge surrounding the production of pornography has generally been regarded as *for men, by men*. This understanding enables two oversimplified notions regarding women and porn: the desire to engage with erotic material is an attribute belonging to men and men only, and women who perform and pose in pornographic material are fundamentally oppressed. Both of these assumptions leave women with little to no agency; this view is particularly prevalent in the current porn industry standard that produces material almost strictly for the male gaze. Catharine Mackinnon, prominent anti-pornography advocate, discusses women's role in porn: "Pornography is a means through which sexuality is socially constructed, a site of construction, a domain of exercise. It constructs women as things for sexual use and constructs its consumers to desperately want women to desperately want possession and cruelty and dehumanization."²⁴ To Mackinnon, pornography is a one-dimensional site that degrades women. She continues by stating, "Women are in pornography to be violated and taken, men to violate and take them, either on screen or by camera or pen, on behalf of the viewer."²⁵ Her views on pornography are radical, focusing only on the most shocking and explicit types of pornography that depict dehumanizing and violent scenarios involving women.

In opposition to anti-pornography feminists, many sex-positive feminists have theorized pornography's potential capacity for empowerment. Women such as Annie Sprinkle, Wendy McElroy, Betty Dodson, Nina Hartley and Tristan Taormino are all contributing to the discourse of pornography – several of which are actively involved with the making of pornographic films themselves. McElroy discusses women's sexuality in pornography: "The most interesting work on women's sexuality is coming from the women in porn who are pushing through all the barriers to produce, direct, and own their own companies."²⁶ Some

²¹ Ibid., 292.

²² Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 289.

²³ Judith Butler, "From Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 441.

²⁴ Catharine Mackinnon, "Sexuality from Toward a Feminist Theory of the State," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 418.

²⁵ Ibid., 418.

²⁶ Wendy McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 191.

feminists argue that women's access and involvement with porn is a political issue, and that abolishing it as a form of sexual expression for women, denies them their basic rights. American feminist Strossen argues that she and other sex-positive feminists "adamantly oppose any effort to restrict sexual speech not only because it would violate our cherished First Amendment freedoms – our freedoms to read, think, speak, sing, write, paint, dance, dream, photography, film, and fantasize as we wish – but also because it would undermine our equality, our status, our dignity, and our autonomy."²⁷ Some suggest feminists who do not support or advocate for women in the porn industry hold anti-feminist sentiments. Hartley declares in an interview with McElroy, "A true feminist is a compassionate person, who tries to encourage women to speak their own truths."²⁸ Sex-positive feminists see pornography as a space where "women need to be supported in their decisions and choices around sex and sexuality."²⁹ Undoubtedly, pornography remains a contested issue, with juxtaposed arguments often positioning feminists against each other as either "for porn" or "against porn". In opposition to this oversimplified binary, I believe the fundamentals of pornography can be re-imagined altogether. An alternative discourse that addresses for whom pornography is created and whose best interests are served would bring critical libratory analysis to this complex topic and generate new forms of knowledge and practices.

In recent years, many sex-positive feminists have become fed up with damaging and oppressive representations of women in mainstream pornography films. Feminist pornography has emerged as porn *by* women, *for* women. Allison Lee discusses feminist porn in her article "The New Face of Porn" and states, "The films all depict consent and active desire, with women as agents of their libidos, rather than being shown as racialized or

inferior objects."³⁰ Lee, a sex-positive feminist and an advocate for feminist porn, is the manager of Good For Her, a feminist sex store in Toronto. She has also been a primary organizer of the Feminist Porn Awards, "which honour the hard-working feminists who are revolutionizing the porn industry."³¹ The films considered for the Feminist Porn Awards should adhere to the following criteria:

Actors are treated with respect, paid fairly, given choice and ethical working conditions, empowered in their work; Directors collaborate with and incorporate the actor's own sexual desires and fantasies (making for better scenes too!); it expands the boundaries of sexual representation on film and challenges stereotypes especially of women and marginalized communities; Realistic pleasure is depicted.³²

Feminist pornography enables agency in women, both in the production of the films as well acknowledging their libidinal desires for erotica.

More and more women have become active agents in the production of pornography. Jacky St. James is one such woman who just recently emerged onto the feminist pornography scene. Known for such films as *Torn*, *Temptation of Eve*, and *The Submission of Emma Marx*, St. James is an outspoken feminist and advocate for pornography. In 2015, she was interviewed by *Salon* magazine about her role in the industry. When asked about whether pornography is inherently degrading to women, St. James responded:

I know that when we're shooting a scene, the woman is fully empowered to make the decision to do that scene. It's kind of taking away the power of being degraded by saying, "Yeah, I'm game for doing a fantasy where I'm thrown down

²⁷ Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 14.

²⁸ McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, 162.

²⁹ Alison Lee. "The New Face of Porn," *This Magazine*, last modified November 26, 2009. <http://this.org/magazine/2009/11/26/feminist-pornography/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "What is feminist porn?" *Feminist Porn Awards*. Last modified 2015. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.feministpornawards.com/what-is-feminist-porn-2/>.

on the bed and tied up and spanked," or whatever. If a woman is saying, "I want to do that, that sounds like a blast," then how is she really being degraded?³³

St. James reveals one of the most important aspects of empowerment in pornography: consent. If a woman *chooses* to participate in pornography, then that action immediately becomes autonomous because it is ultimately, and most importantly, her choice. In response to a question about empowerment being misunderstood for oppression, St. James states:

I think that it's unfortunate that there is content out there that is degrading to women, or can appear to be degrading to women, without that understanding of the fact that a woman has a right to choose what kind of profession she's in, and she has a right to choose what sex acts she's involved in. At least on our sets, nobody's being coerced, everybody is fully consenting. It's a very gray area, and I understand the question, it's just hard to say because I think the onus of responsibility lies more with the person watching it than the people producing it. The onus of responsibility of that perception, I guess.³⁴

Feminist pornographers, like St. James, aim to portray diverse and autonomous representations of sexuality in films, without the typical trope of coercion and exploitation found in mainstream pornography.

Feminist pornographers are transforming the hegemonic discourse surrounding female sexuality and representation in porn. Under conditions of safety and respect, porn can now be seen as potentially empowering to women, as opposed to strictly oppressive and dehumanizing. While I do not dispute the danger associated with contemporary conventional pornographic images predominant on the Internet – especially those depicting violence, rape, dehumanization, and racist and misogynistic

notions – I believe feminist porn can be utilized as a tool of sexual reclamation and feminine liberation.

'At Its Best': Feminist Porn as a Site for New Knowledge

Elizabeth Grosz's article "The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges" presents an examination of feminist theory that is relevant to the present discussion. Grosz's main premise for her article revolves around the notion of feminist theory *at its best*. She asks, "How can we produce knowledges, techniques, methods, practices that bring out the best in ourselves, that enable us to overcome ourselves, that open us up to the embrace of an unknown and open-ended future, that brings into existence new kinds of beings, new kinds of subjects, and new relations?"³⁵ I posit that feminist porn is doing just that; bringing out the best in ourselves, bringing into existence new kinds of subjects and new relations, and opening us up to an unknown and open-ended future. As Lee points out, "Feminist porn producers already depict women as active participants in their own sexual fantasy. The project going forward will be to continue to ensure safe, appropriate working conditions, for those who appear in and produce porn, while continuing to work on traditional feminist goals, including eradicating the exploitation of women."³⁶ To some, feminist pornography may be considered oppressive and deviant, however, porn production as a feminist practice – reclaiming eroticism and sexual desires for women – becomes a way to reinvent traditional patriarchal discourse and practices into something "good for her."

Instead of simply acknowledging the fundamental biases and issues with mainstream porn, sex-positive feminists are actively engaging with new genres of pornography and subverting stereotypical representations of female sexuality. Grosz discusses the importance of producing new knowledges, saying, "*At its best*, feminist theory is about the invention of the new: new practices, new positions, new projects, new techniques, new values."³⁷

³³ Kutner, Jenny. "The Woman Who Conquered Porn: How Jacky St. James Became the Most Important Name in the Business." *Salon*, last modified January 4, 2015. http://www.salon.com/2015/01/05/the_woman_who_conquered_porn_how_jacky_st_james_became_the_most_imp_ortant_name_in_the_business/

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

³⁶ Lee, "The New Face of Porn,"

³⁷ Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life*,

Feminist porn is a complete overhaul of an existing structure within society that is oppressive to women, transforming porn into something erotic, sensual, empowering, pleasurable for all women involved. Lee discusses the ways in which feminist porn is innovative: "The new face of porn has an opportunity to disrupt stereotypes and address new viewers, all while creating a feminist view of sexuality."³⁸ Grosz continues her discussion of new knowledges by stating, "It is clear that it must understand and address the old, what is and has been, and the force of the past and present in attempting to pre-apprehend and control the new, and to that extent feminist theory is committed to 'critique,' the process of demonstrating the contingency and transformability of what is given."³⁹ We do need to understand and address the old – harmful depictions of women in mainstream pornography – but to simply exclude women's sexual desires in the form of porn in feminist theory and practice is not the answer. Similar to the ways in which the female orgasm and lesbianism were excluded from dominant discourses surrounding women's sexuality, the enabling pleasures of feminist pornography have remained less visible in mainstream understandings of erotica. The female orgasm and lesbian identities were once "new" knowledges within feminism, and now feminist pornography emerges as an entirely reconceptualized way of exploring women's desires, sexuality, and eroticism.

It is not enough to simply name women's oppression. Feminists need to find ways to alter the existing structures and institutions that limit women's full capacity as sexual beings. As notable feminist theorist bell hooks states, "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice."⁴⁰ I have demonstrated in this paper the ways in which female sexuality and eroticism have been grounded in patriarchal ideologies. Since the beginning of second wave feminism,

feminist theorists have been countering the hegemonic discourses surrounding women's bodies and desires, reclaiming their sexuality as a site of empowerment and agency. This paper has examined three elements of female sexuality that have historically been deemed deviant in mainstream society: the female orgasm, lesbianism, and feminist pornography – all of which have emerged (or are emerging) as "new" modes of eroticism for women. Feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff states, "... the mediation of female bodies into constructions of woman is dominated by misogynist discourse."⁴¹ Feminist theory, however, has provided an important springboard and counter discourse, which has aided in re-imagining sexual desires, practices, and identities, as it departs from the old and brings us into the new.

Politics, and Art, 83.

³⁸ Lee, "The New Face of Porn,"

³⁹ Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections of Life, Politics, and Art*, 89.

⁴⁰ bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 28.

⁴¹ Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 368.

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