The Feminist Porn Book

The Politics of Producing Pleasure

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Introduction: The Politics of Producing Pleasure

CONSTANCE PENLEY, CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU, MIREILLE MILLER-YOUNG, and TRISTAN TAORMINO

The Feminist Porn Book is the first collection to bring together writings by feminist porn producers and feminist porn scholars to engage, challenge, and re-imagine pornography. As collaborating editors of this volume, we are three porn professors and one porn director who have had an energetic dialogue about feminist politics and pornography for years. In their criticism, feminist opponents of porn cast pornography as a monolithic medium and industry and make sweeping generalizations about its production, its workers, its consumers, and its effects on society. These antiporn feminists respond to feminist pornographers and feminist porn professors in several ways. They accuse us of deceiving ourselves and others about the nature of pornography; they claim we fail to look critically at any porn and hold up all porn as empowering. More typically, they simply dismiss out of hand our ability or authority to make it or study it. But The Feminist Porn Book offers arguments, facts, and histories that cannot be summarily rejected, by providing on-the-ground and well-researched accounts of the politics of producing pleasure. Our agenda is twofold: to explore the emergence and significance of a thriving feminist porn movement, and to gather some of the best new feminist scholarship on pornography. By putting our voices into conversation, this book sparks new thinking about the richness and complexity of porn as a genre and an industry in a way that helps us to appreciate the work that feminists in the porn industry are doing, both in the mainstream and on its countercultural edges.

So to begin, we offer a broad definition of feminist porn, which will be fleshed out, debated, and examined in the pieces that follow. As both an established and emerging genre of pornography, feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure at their most confounding and difficult, including pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homo-
normativity. It seeks to unsettle conventional definitions of sex, and expand the language of sex as an erotic activity, an expression of identity, a power exchange, a cultural commodity, and even a new politics.

Feminist porn creates alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and discourses. It evolved out of and incorporates elements from the genres of “porn for women,” “couples porn,” and lesbian porn as well as feminist photography, performance art, and experimental filmmaking. It does not assume a singular female viewer, but acknowledges multiple female (and other) viewers with many different preferences. Feminist porn makers emphasize the importance of their labor practices in production and their treatment of performers/sex workers; in contrast to norms in the mainstream sectors of the adult entertainment industry, they strive to create a fair, safe, ethical, consensual work environment and often create imagery through collaboration with their subjects. Ultimately, feminist porn considers sexual representation—and its production—a site for resistance, intervention, and change.

The concept of feminist porn is rooted in the 1980s—the height of the feminist porn wars in the United States. The porn wars (also known as the sex wars) emerged out of a debate between feminists about the role of sexualized representation in society and grew into a full-scale divide that has lasted over three decades. In the heyday of the women’s movement in the United States, a broad-based, grassroots activist struggle over the proliferation of misogynistic and violent representations in corporate media was superceded by an effort focused specifically on legally banning the most explicit, and seemingly most sexist, media: pornography. Employing Robin Morgan’s slogan, “Porn is the theory, rape is the practice,” antipornography feminists argued that pornography amounted to the commodification of rape. As a group called Women Against Pornography (WAP) began to organize in earnest to ban obscenity across the nation, other feminists, such as Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter, Kate Ellis, and Carol Vance became vocal critics of what they viewed as WAP’s ill-conceived collusion with a sexually conservative Reagan administration and Christian Right, and their warping of feminist activism into a moral hygiene or public decency movement. Regarding antiporn feminism as a huge setback for the feminist struggle to empower women and sexual minorities, an energetic community of sex worker and sex-radical activists joined antiscensorship and sex-positive feminists to build the foundation for the feminist porn movement.1

The years that led up to the feminist porn wars are often referred to as the “golden age of porn,” a period from the early 1970s to the early 1980s,
marked by large budget, high-production-value feature films that were theatrically released. A group of female porn performers who worked during the golden age—including Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Candida Royalle, Gloria Leonard, and Veronica Hart—formed a support group (the first of its kind) called Club 90 in New York City. In 1984, the feminist arts collective Carnival Knowledge asked Club 90 to participate in a festival called The Second Coming, and explore the question, “Is there a feminist pornography?” It is one of the first documented times when feminists publicly posed and examined this critical query.

That same year, Club 90 member Candida Royalle founded Femme Productions to create a new genre: porn from a woman’s point of view. Her films focused on storylines, high production values, female pleasure, and romance. In San Francisco, publishers Myrna Elana and Deborah Sundahl, along with Nan Kinney and Susie Bright, co-founded On Our Backs, the first porn magazine by and for lesbians. A year later, Kinney and Sundahl started Fatale Video to produce and distribute lesbian porn movies that expanded the mission that On Our Backs began. In the mainstream adult industry, performer and registered nurse Nina Hartley began producing and starring in a line of sex education videos for Adam and Eve, with her first two titles released in 1984. A parallel movement began to emerge throughout Europe in the 1980s and 90s.

By the 1990s, Royalle and Hartley’s success had made an impact on the mainstream adult industry. Major studios, including Vivid, VCA, and Wicked, began producing their own lines of couples porn that reflected Royalle’s vision and generally followed a formula of softer, gentler, more romantic porn with storylines and high production values. The growth of the “couples porn” genre signified a shift in the industry: female desire and viewership were finally acknowledged, if narrowly defined. This provided more selection for female viewers and more opportunities for women to direct mainstream heterosexual films, including Veronica Hart and Kelly Holland (a.k.a. Toni English). Independent, lesbian-produced lesbian porn grew at a slower pace, but Fatale Video (which continued to produce new films until the mid-1990s) finally had some company in its micro-genre with work by Annie Sprinkle, Maria Beatty, and Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano. Sprinkle also made the first porn film to feature a trans man, and Christopher Lee followed with a film starring an entire cast of trans men.

In the early 2000s, feminist porn began to take hold in the United States with the emergence of filmmakers who specifically identified themselves and/or their work as feminist including Buck Angel, Dana Dane, Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble, Madison Young, and
Tristan Taormino. Simultaneously, feminist filmmakers in Europe began to gain notoriety for their porn and sexually explicit independent films, including Erika Lust in Spain; Anna Span and Petra Joy in the UK; Emili Jouve, Virginie Despentes, and Taiwan-born Shu Lea Cheang in France; and Mia Engberg, who created a compilation of feminist porn shorts that was famously funded by the Swedish government.

The modern feminist porn movement gained tremendous ground in 2006 with the creation of The Feminist Porn Awards (FPAs). Chanelle Gallant and other staffers at sex-positive sex toy shop Good for Her in Toronto created the awards, which were open to films that met one or more of the following criteria:

1. A woman had a hand in the production, writing, direction, etc. of the work;
2. It depicts genuine female pleasure;
3. It expands the boundaries of sexual representation on film and challenges stereotypes that are often found in mainstream porn. And of course, it has to be hot!

Overall, Feminist Porn Award winners tend to show movies that consider a female viewer from start to finish. This means that you are more likely to see active desire and consent, real orgasms, and women taking control of their own fantasies (even when that fantasy is to hand over that control). These criteria simultaneously assumed and announced a viewership, an authorship, an industry, and a collective consciousness. Embedded in the description is a female viewer and what she likely wants to see—active desire, consent, real orgasms, power, and agency—and doesn’t want to see: passivity, stereotypes, coercion, or fake orgasms. The language is broad enough so as not to be prescriptive, yet it places value on agency and authenticity, with a parenthetical nod to the possibility that not every woman’s fantasy is to be “in control.” While the guidelines notably focus on a woman’s involvement in production, honored filmmakers run the gamut from self-identified feminist pornographers to independent female directors to mainstream porn producers; the broad criteria achieve a certain level of inclusiveness and acknowledge that a range of work can be read by audiences, critics, and academics as feminist.

The FPAs have raised awareness about feminist porn among a wider audience and helped coalesce a community of filmmakers, performers, and fans; they highlight an industry within an industry, and, in the process, nurture this growing movement. In 2009, Dr. Laura Mérritt (Berlin) cre-
ated the PorYes campaign and the European Feminist Porn Award modeled on the FPAs. Because the movement has had the most momentum in Europe and North America, this volume concentrates on the scholarship and films of Western nations. We acknowledge this limitation: for feminist porn to be a global project, more would need to be done to include non-Western scholars and pornographers in the conversation.

The work we do now, as scholars and producers, could not exist without early examinations of the history and context of pornography, including *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship* by FACT, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force. Linda Williams’s groundbreaking 1989 *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* opened the door for feminist scholars to productively examine pornography as film and popular culture, as a genre and industry, textually, historically, and sociologically. Laura Kipnis’s 1996 *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* made the strongest possible case that “the differences between pornography and other forms of culture are less meaningful than their similarities.” Jane Juffer’s 1996 *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* urged us to pay close attention not just to the hardcore porn typically consumed by men but to the uses of pornography in the daily lives of ordinary women. Since 1974 the film magazine *Jump Cut* has published more original scholarship on porn from a pro-sex, anticensorship perspective than any other media journal and by leading figures in the field, including Chuck Kleinhaus, Linda Williams, Laura Kipnis, Richard Dyer, Thomas Waugh, Eithne Johnson, Eric Schaefer, Peter Lehman, Robert Eberwein, and Joanna Russ. More recently, Drucilla Cornell’s *Feminism and Pornography*, Linda Williams’s *Porn Studies*, and Pamela Church Gibson’s *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power* cemented the value of porn scholarship. The Feminist Porn Book seeks to further that scholarship by adding a significant, valuable component: feminists creating pornography.

In this book, we identify a forty-year-long movement of thinkers, viewers, and makers, grounded in their desire to use pornography to explore new sexualities in representation. The work we have collected here defies other feminist conceptions of sexuality on screen as forever marked by a threat. That threat is the specter of violence against women, which is the primary way that pornography has come to be seen. Claiming that explicit sexual representations are nothing but gender oppression means that pornography’s portrayal of explicit sex acts is a form of absolute discipline and subjugation for women. Within this frame, women who watch, study, or work in pornography bear the mark of
false consciousness—as if they dabble in fire while ignoring the risk of burning.

The overwhelming popularity of women’s erotic literature, illustrated by the recent worldwide best seller, Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James, and the flourishing women’s fan fiction community from which it emerged, proves that there is great demand among women for explicit sexual representations. Millions of female readers embraced the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy—which follows a young woman who becomes the submissive sexual partner to a dominant man—not for its depiction of oppression, but for its exploration of erotic freedom. Women-authored erotica and pornography speaks to fantasies women actually have, fantasies that are located in a world where women must negotiate power constantly, including in their imaginations and desires. As with the criteria for winning a Feminist Porn Award, these books and the feminist porn movement show that “women are taking control of their own fantasies (even when that fantasy is to hand over control).”

With the emergence of new technologies that allow more people than ever to both create and consume pornography, the moral panic-driven fears of porn are ratcheted up once again. Society’s dread of women who own their desire, and use it in ways that confound expectations of proper female sexuality, persists. As Gayle Rubin shows, “Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value.” Rubin maps this system as one where “the charmed circle” is perpetually threatened by the “outer limits” or those who fall out of the bounds of the acceptable. On the bottom of this hierarchy are sexual acts and identities outside heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and reproduction. She argues that this hierarchy exists so as to justify the privileging of normative and constricted sexualities and the denigration and punishment of the “sexual rabble.” The Feminist Porn Book showcases precisely these punishable sex acts and identities that are outside of the charmed circle and proudly sides with the sexual rabble. Spotlighting the numerous ways people confront the power of sexuality, this book paves the way for exploring the varieties of what were previously dismissed as perversities. At the same time, feminist porn can also expose what passes for “normal” sexuality at the center of that charmed circle.

One of the unfortunate results of the porn wars was the fixing of an antiporn camp versus a sex-positive/pro-porn camp. On one side, a capital P “Pornography” was a visual embodiment of the patriarchy and violence against women. On the other, Porn was defended as “speech,” or as a form that should not be foreclosed because it might some day be transformed into a vehicle for women’s erotic expression. The nuances
and complexities of actual lowercase “pornographies” were lost in the middle. For example, sex-positive thinking does not always accommodate the ways in which women are constrained by sexuality. But the problem with antipornography’s assumption that sex is inherently oppressive to women—that women are debased when they have sex on camera—ignores and represses the sexuality of women. Hence, for us, sex-positive feminist porn does not mean that sex is always a ribbon-tied box of happiness and joy. Instead, feminist porn captures the struggle to define, understand, and locate one’s sexuality. It recognizes the importance of deferring judgment about the significance of sex in intimate and social relations, and of not presuming what sex means for specific people. Feminist porn explores sexual ideas and acts that may be fraught, confounding, and deeply disturbing to some, and liberating and empowering to others. What we see at work here are competing definitions of sexuality that expose the power of sexuality in all of its unruliness.

Because feminist porn acknowledges that identities are socially situated and that sexuality has the power to discipline, punish, and subjugate, that unruliness may involve producing images that seem oppressive, degrading, or violent. Feminist porn does not shy away from the darker shades of women’s fantasies. It creates a space for realizing the contradictory ways in which our fantasies do not always line up with our politics or ideas of who we think we are. As Tom Waugh argues, participation in pornography, in his case as spectator, can be a “process of social identity formation.” Indeed, social identities and ideas are formed in the act of viewing porn, but also in making and writing about it.

Strongly influenced by other social movements in the realm of sexuality, like the sex-positive, LGBT rights, and sex workers’ rights movements, feminist porn aims to build community, to expand liberal views on gender and sexuality, and to educate and empower performers and audiences. It favors fair, ethical working conditions for sex workers and the inclusion of underrepresented identities and practices. Feminist porn vigorously challenges the hegemonic depictions of gender, sex roles, and the pleasure and power of mainstream porn. It also challenges the antiporn feminist interpretive framework for pornography as bankrupt of progressive sexual politics. As a budding movement, it promotes aesthetic and ethical practices that intervene in dominant sexual representation and mobilize a collective vision for change. This erotic activism, while in no way homogeneous or consistent, works within and against the marketplace to imagine new ways to envision gender and sexuality in our culture.

But feminist porn is not only an emergent social movement and an
alternative cultural production: it is a genre of media made for profit. Part of a multibillion dollar business in adult entertainment media, feminist porn is an industry within an industry. Some feminist porn is produced independently, often created and marketed by and for underrepresented minorities like lesbians, transgender folks, and people of color. But feminist porn is also produced within the mainstream adult industry by feminists whose work is funded and distributed by large companies such as Vivid Entertainment, Adam and Eve, and Evil Angel Productions. As outliers or insiders (or both) to the mainstream industry, feminists have adapted different strategies for subverting dominant pornographic norms and tropes. Some reject nearly all elements of a typical adult film, from structure to aesthetics, while others tweak the standard formula (from “foreplay” to “cum shot”) to reposition and prioritize female sexual agency. Although feminist porn makers define their work as distinct from mainstream porn, it is nonetheless viewed by a range of people, including people who identify as feminist and specifically seek it out, as well as other viewers who don’t. Feminist porn is gaining momentum and visibility as a market and a movement. This movement is made up of performers turned directors, independent queer producers, politicized sex workers, porn geeks and bloggers, and radical sex educators. These are the voices found here. This is the perfect time for The Feminist Porn Book.

In this book, we place academics alongside and in conversation with sex industry workers to bridge the divide between rigorous research and critique, and real world challenges and interventions. In Jill Nagle’s seminal work Whores and Other Feminists, she announced, “This time . . . sex worker feminists speak not as guests, nor as disgruntled exiles, but as insiders to feminism.” As in Nagle’s collection, here those working in the porn industry speak for themselves, and their narratives illuminate their complicated experiences, contradict one another, and expose the damaging one-dimensional rhetoric of the antiporn feminist resurgence. Like feminist porn itself, the diverse voices in this collection challenge entrenched, divisive dichotomies of academic and popular, scholar and sex worker, pornographer and feminist.

In the first section of the book, Making Porn, Debating Porn, feminist porn pioneers Betty Dodson, Candida Royalle, and Susie Bright give a grounded history of feminist porn as it emerged in the 1980s in response to the limiting sexual imagination of both mainstream porn and antiporn feminism. Providing a window into the generative and deeply contested period of the sex wars, these feminist pornographers highlight the stakes and energies surrounding the birth of feminist porn activism in
the face of an antiporn feminism that ignored, misunderstood, or vilified them and their efforts. Bright’s account of watching her first porn film, sitting among suspicious men in a dark adult theater, sets the stage for how the invention of the VHS player shifted women’s consumption of porn and dramatically changed the marketplace.

In the last decade, a new war on porn has been resurrected and redefined by Gail Dines, Sheila Jeffries, Karen Boyle, Pamela Paul, Robert Jensen, and others. Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith show how this resurgent antiporn movement resists theory and evidence, and tendentiously reframes the production and consumption of porn as a mode of sex trafficking, a form of addiction, or a public health problem of epidemic proportions. Attwood and Smith’s work powerfully exposes how feminist porn remains challenged and often censored in contemporary popular discourse. Lynn Comella focuses on the consequences of pornography going public. She examines one of the most significant elements of the emergence of feminist porn: the growth of sex-positive, women-owned-and-run sex shops and a grassroots sex education movement that create space for women to produce, find, and consume new kinds of pornography.

Watching and Being Watched examines how desire and agency inform pornographic performance, representation, and spectatorship. Sinnamon Love and Mireille Miller-Young explore the complex position of African American women as they watch, critique, and create representations of black women’s sexuality. Dylan Ryan and Jane Ward take up the concept of authenticity in porn: what it means, how it’s read, and why it is (or is not) crucial to feminist porn performance and spectatorship. Ingrid Ryberg looks at how public screenings of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn can create spaces for sexual empowerment. Tobi Hill-Meyer complicates Ryberg’s analysis by documenting who, until very recently, was left out of these spaces: trans women. Keiko Lane echoes Ryberg’s argument of the radical potential of queer and feminist porn and offers it as a tool for understanding and expressing desire among marginalized communities.

The intersection of feminist porn as pedagogy and feminist pedagogies of porn is highlighted in Doing It In School. As porn scholars, Constance Penley and Ariane Cruz grapple with teaching and studying porn from two very different perspectives. Kevin Heffernan offers a history of sex instruction in film and contrasts it with work from Nina Hartley and Tristan Taormino in educational porn movies. Hartley discusses how she has used porn to teach throughout her twenty-five-plus years in the industry, and Taormino outlines her practice as a feminist pornographer
offering organic, fair-trade porn that takes into account the labor of its workers. Performer Danny Wylde documents his personal experiences with power, consent, and exploitation against a backdrop of antiporn rhetoric. Lorelei Lee offers a powerful manifesto that demands we all become better students in order to achieve a more nuanced, discerning, and thoughtful discourse about porn and sex.

Now Playing: Feminist Porn takes up questions of hyper-corporeality, genderqueerness, transfemininity, feminized masculinity, transgressive racial performance, and disability. Jiz Lee discusses how they (Lee’s favored gender-neutral pronoun) use their transgressive female body and genderqueer identity to defy categories. April Flores describes herself as “a fat Latina with pale skin, tattoos, and fire engine red hair,” and gives her unique take on being (and not being) a Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) performer. Bobby Noble explores the role of trans men and the interrogation of masculinities in feminist porn, while renowned trans male performer Buck Angel explodes sex/gender dichotomies by embodying his identity of a man with a vagina. Also concerned with the complex representation and performance of manhood in feminist pornography, Celine Parreñas Shimizu asks how race shapes the work of straight Asian male performer Keni Styles. Loree Erickson, a feminist pornographer and PhD candidate, represents not only a convergence of scholarship and sex work, but one of the most overlooked subjects in pornography and one de-eroticized in society: “queer femmegimp.” Emerging to speak from group identities previously missing or misnamed, the pieces in this section are by people who show the beauty of their desires, give shape to their realities, reject and reclaim attributions made by others, and describe how they create sexual worlds that denounce inequality.

Throughout the book, we explore the multiple definitions of feminist porn, but we refuse to fix its boundaries. Feminist porn is a genre and a political vision. And like other genres of film and media, feminist porn shares common themes, aesthetics, and goals even though its parameters are not clearly demarcated. Because it is born out of a feminism that is not one thing but a living, breathing, moving creation, it is necessarily contested—an argument, a polemic, and a debate. Because it is both genre and practice, we must engage it as both: by reading and analyzing its cultural texts and examining the ideals, intentions, and experiences of its producers. In doing so, we offer an alternative to unsubstantiated oversimplifications and patronizing rhetoric. We acknowledge the complexities of watching, creating, and analyzing pornographies. And we believe in the radical potential of feminist porn to transform sexual representation and the way we live our sexualities.
Notes


5. Feminists in Europe who used sexually explicit photography and film to explore themes like female pleasure, S/M, bondage, gender roles, and queer desire include Monika Treut (Germany), Cleo Uebelmann (Switzerland), Krista Beinstein (Germany and Austria), and Della Grace (England). In 1998, Danish film production company Zentropa wrote the Puzzy Power Manifesto that outlined its guidelines for a new line of porn for women, which echoed Royale's vision: their films included plot-driven narratives that depicted foreplay and emotional connection, women's pleasure and desire, and male and female bodies beyond just their genitals. See Laura Merrit, “PorY es! The European Feminist Porn Movement,” [unpublished manuscript] and Zentropa, “The Manifesto,” accessed January 29, 2012, http://www.puzzypower.dk/UK/index.php/om-os/manifest.

6. In addition, we must acknowledge the early work of Sachi Hamano, the first woman to direct “pink films” (Japanese softcore porn). Hamano directed more than three hundred in the 1980s and 90s in order to portray women's sexual power and agency, and challenge the representation of women as sex objects only present to fulfill men's fantasies. See Virginie Sélavy, “Interview with Sachi Hamano,” December 1, 2009, http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2009/12/01/interview-with-sachi-hamano/.


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