PORNOGRAPHIC PERMUTATIONS

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The article provides a response to comments from Lisa Henderson directed to myself, in relation to my short opening paper delivered at the International Communications Association Conference in 2007. Henderson queried an over-hasty condemnation on my own part of the hypersexualisation of contemporary young women's commercial culture and the mainstreaming of pornography as sex entertainment. Henderson encouraged me to revise the paper, and here I argue that current pornographic permutations, within a liberalising discourse which celebrates the newfound freedom of young women to participate, there are nevertheless new modalities of exclusion and a seeming shoring up of the heterosexual matrix. At the same time within this more relaxed matrix of heterosexuality there are generation-based tensions and evasions and undesignated same-sex desires which refuse the labels of gay, queer or lesbian, as political, or as belonging to previous generations. This whole terrain requires that feminists return to the anti-censorship and pro-sex writing from the 1980s and 1990s, with a view to update and re-conceptualisation.

Pornography is nothing if not a feminist issue, yet, it is my argument here, that existing paradigms have not been updated or revised so as to be capable of fully engaging with current pornographic permutations. While I do not here offer any specifically new feminist theory responses to pornography, I am making the call for the importance of this work to be done, and I am also suggesting that feminists need to be more present again in current public debate on these topics, since a good deal is at stake. There are three permutations that have attracted my attention, the first of which is the move of the pornography industry into the mainstream as sex entertainment such that popular culture becomes thoroughly infused with what in the past would have been deemed top-shelf only pornographic imagery;

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the second is the active participation of women as consumers of this mate-
rial, such that they are factored in as key demographics, market sectors
that have to be reached; and the third is the incorporation into the reper-
toire of marketing vocabularies of a faux feminist language of empower-
ment and entitlement, which flags up that women in the West have now
(more or less) won equality with men. They have won the right to sexual
freedom, and this in turn can be seen as a defining feature of Western
modernity, set against the repressive values of other cultures most notably
Islamic cultures. While there has been a recent attempt to deal with some
of these neo-imperialistic dynamics in relation to the pornographic
images and torture scenes at Abu Ghaib prison by Judith Butler, there is
little material that considers in more depth these complex social and
political processes (Butler). There is no shortage of ethnographic studies
of women as consumers of sex gadgetry or of women as viewers and
readers of soft porn, but such studies tend to be rather stuck within a now
banal cultural studies language of empowerment, and of feminine plea-
sures, each of which are actually disputable. If this sounds harsh then per-
haps it is an index of my own frustration that there are pressing issues
which are in need of strong reconceptualized feminist responses. For this
reason, I am grateful to have the opportunity to reply to Lisa Henderson’s
comments and to rehearse again some of those points I made in the open-
ing session at the ICA in May 2007, which related specifically to the
“dangers” arising from the mainstreaming of pornography as a now fixed
feature of popular culture.¹ Henderson is quite right to chide me for
resorting to a vaguely censorious language; it is something perhaps that
one can slip into too easily. But as a starting point, and as a way of
reminding the reader of the core connection between feminism and por-
nography, let me offer some litmus test examples. About a year ago, I was
in the check-out queue in a large supermarket in Camden Town in
London on a Saturday afternoon. In front of me and behind me were
mothers and children, but right ahead of me in the queue was a man in his
mid to late thirties, who was pouring over pages from a magazine that he
had laid open on the check-out belt, showing full frontal shots of young
women on each page which he flicked backwards and forwards as he
waited. My initial response, despite my anti-censorship and pro-sex
stance, was actually to kick him. I resisted but when I got home I phoned
the manager and made a complaint. The manager, a friendly Asian man,
duly apologized and said that normally this top-shelf material was sealed
up in cellophane bags. The customer must have ripped open the bag at the
check-out. He agreed this was an unpleasant incident, especially since
there were children around. A similar kind of situation arose just a week
or so ago, on BBC 2’s rather risque and high camp Graham Norton Show
when the gay film director John Waters, whose Hairspray had just
opened as a musical, told the host Graham Norton how he had been sitting in a first-class seat on a flight from New York and the man sitting next to him spent the journey pouring over close-up shots of “vaginas.” Waters raised his eyebrows, but then said “well, each to his own.” Earlier in the program for a microsecond on the screen there appeared in the context of a gossip story about Britney Spears the infamous vagina shots which she herself had more or less orchestrated by going out without underwear knowing cameras would be pointing at her. My reaction was quite different in each of these situations. With Britney, I was rather impressed by such flagrant disregard for norms of female modesty, flashing her vagina in this way seemed not so far removed from her equally public hair-shaving episode. These actions somehow lifted her out of the norms of carefully media-managed femininity, even when it is permanently set in shock mode. But in relation to John Waters’ fellow passenger, I thought, had that been me, I would have requested a seat change immediately. So do these responses make me, in fact, a feminist puritan despite my protestations otherwise, with the Britney exception which I “condone” because she takes it too far and gives rise to social discomfort rather than banal arousal? Am I reacting against masturbatory scenes, for male pleasure which are conducted in the full view of others? But if so, why am I not offended by Britney’s flashing which has all the qualities of female exhibitionism? Am I myself proposing a double standard in favor of women on the basis of past subjugation now being righted by possibilities such as these? The final litmus test takes me in another direction entirely. To check on my reaction, I flick through some of the best known writing by Andrea Dworkin which many years ago I found crude, essentialist, and prepared to cast all women as victims. They were victims even if they did not consider themselves as such or feel themselves to be victims. But I also recall having other misgivings and it was these that were repeated in my brief read-through. Once again, I felt that Dworkin was playing a dishonest game in describing in detail the bad things men did to women. I felt that somehow in writing those words, there was a sense in which she herself was being turned on, with these pages after pages of lurid detail. She was in effect rewriting a series of violent pornographic encounters, as though also for her own satisfaction, and this made me suspicious of her motives. This is also a crude Foucault point, that the priest telling the confessor all the things that he or she cannot do, is also at that moment producing the sex that is to be forbidden. Dworkin was doing the same here. She seemed to be scolding women for not holding the same strict procensorship position as herself while all the time repeating ad nauseam (just as Butler reminds us in regard to debates on censorship) the nature and detail of the “offenses” and the scenes of denigration which are designed to arouse the viewer or reader sexually, but which we are told we
must also avoid or have withdrawn and made unavailable by those who know better, i.e., the state, the priesthood, or some feminist experts (Butler, 1997).

I confess then to my own uncertainty in this new field of endlessly available “hot” material. But I am surprised that apart from some energetic website activity undertaken by young women such as the f word or bitch magazine, there is very little feminist response in whatever guise or shape that might take. And alongside this there is an assumption that any critical response by women is taken to be a signal that they must be embittered feminists, and since this is such a widely held view, it also acts as a deterrent on young women making their own opinions heard in the public domain. These young women are for some reason more fearful than one might have imagined of the tabloid label of man-hating lesbian, or of being uncool and as a result of this quietness, the floodgates have opened on the part of the sex entertainment or pornography industry to see how far they can go.2

At any rate, it is well known that the most frequent complaints of the sort I myself have made nowadays are made by mothers who object to their children being confronted by this kind of material. So far the litmus test shows me to partly fulfill the stereotypes of the angry feminist. And yet I have no objection to nonviolent pornography for private consumption, nor do I accept the need for censorship on the grounds that Butler has also spelled out in her book Excitable Speech (Butler, 1997). Not only do I accept that sex work is work, not so different from other work, but I have always argued for destigmatization of the sex industry, and I am always pleased to see the usual codes that have marked out abject prostitutes’ bodies being jumbled by fashion, style, and subcultures which in effect give women the right to wear whatever clothing they like on the street without this being taken as a signal of availability.3 When all girls look like hookers, the sex worker on the street merges with the masses and is less visible as an object of contempt or derision.

In the most generous of ways, Henderson slightly takes me to task for perhaps overreacting to the new world of sex entertainment which now makes itself more amenable to a wider audience by encouraging the participation of women as consumers of porn, no longer its victims, and involved in whatever capacity on the basis of personal choice. I hoped that my comments were understood in the context of my ICA lecture as a whole, where I was attempting to counter the claims made by fierce critics of cultural studies like Todd Gitlin and Robert Chesney who accuse the field (and myself) of losing track of political responsibility. Despite defending cultural studies against this slur of irresponsibility, I was nevertheless myself at the ICA critical of feminist work on key texts of popular culture like Sex in the City, where the authors proclaimed themselves to be fans of the genre as well as cultural analysts, and whose fandom on occasion leads to a seeming loss of critical voice.4 The more general point
there was that the pleasures of fandom in relation to programs like this, which attract huge female audiences, are not interrogated with the kind of psycho-analytical vocabularies that dissected feminine pleasures in earlier feminist work through the 1980s. Indeed there is an almost total absence of either psycho-analysis or indeed the insights that a Foucauldian perspective would bring to bear on the regulationist underpinning of the cultural production of feminine or indeed feminist pleasures. Instead many of these responses to this and other programs directed towards women entail simply showing their narratives to have taken on board or to have absorbed some aspects of feminist thinking, which from my own perspective should not be a cause for celebration but rather a critical departure point suggesting new levels of power and discipline now embedded within a language that appears to promote and celebrate female empowerment, and might even suggest that it has been influenced by feminism. This intensification of viewing pleasures seems to blinker some authors to critical reality. For example, even the most banal recognition that feminist-influenced sectors of the female audience are a category in market research, in the knowledge economy and in the internet sex businesses made possible through new media technology. This is more what I meant by new dangers. There is a direct connection here with the new pornography debate insofar as the same argument is frequently made—if women enjoy it, if they have come forward as consumers of sex entertainment in an unprecedented way, then what is the problem? Indeed this is a sign of some feminist success. Women have won the right to the same pleasures as men. In which case there is nothing much more to be said on the matter. This position, vocal in cultural studies, is I would suggest one-dimensional and in some respects anti-intellectual in that it refuses the challenge posed by a changing regime of sexuality within the context of an increasingly neo-liberal global culture. Ignoring the intersection of neo-liberal values with sex imagery in the context of militarization, war, and violence, means remaining unable to understand for example the pictures from Abu Ghraib, the role of women, and the deployment of “western freedoms” as instruments of shaming and torture. In my ICA paper, I was referring precisely to the way in which a kind of liberal feminism is used as a marketing tool to legitimize and sanitize sex entertainment and also to add something new to its existing repertoire. I can see exactly why Lisa Henderson urges caution and resists the temptation to resort to a kind of feminist anti-pornography response. My point in the presentation was a more general one, that by and large, younger women scholars, at least in my own field, have steered clear of critical engagement with the landscape of mainstream popular sex entertainment, with questions about what is actually going on here. And strangely no one, it seems, attempts to bring back into the equation the anti-censorship,
pro-sex work of writers like those included in Carole Vance’s (1984) classic collection *Pleasure and Danger*, and then to reflect on how to reconcile the new scenes of *Girls Gone Wild* and the ubiquitousness of the staging of so-called hot lesbians, within this strand of popular culture. How might these be responded to through references to Rubin’s seminal “Thinking Sex”? (Rubin, 1984). This is what I meant by asking the question, where is Gayle Rubin today?

My sense is that the prevailing post-Tarantino ethos of cool, and the more general repudiation of a certain version of feminism (one with which many of us would not identify—let us say the Sheila Jeffrey’s version, or of course, Andrea Dworkin), both have an impact on the sensibilities of the many young women journalists for whom this kind of material would otherwise be in their orbit. Nothing could be more *passe* than to criticize patriarchy. But this does not mean that there is no pressing need for an analysis of the media circuit where popular feminism is absorbed into a more commercial sex industry, making it more acceptable since it now seems to be a totally women-friendly phenomenon, while at the same time this field of sex entertainment also seeks to provoke the old feminists who are assumed to be its enemies. And it does this, for example, by putting the *Playboy* bunny logo on children’s and especially girls’ products, or by marketing a *Playboy* bunny t-shirt for 10-year-old girls, or by selling sexually provocative underwear to preadolescent girls and so on, or by adopting *faux* sexist stances that would include, for example, in 2000, the projecting across the scale of the House of Commons in London the naked backside of the TV presenter Gail Porter as an advertisement for the cool lads’ magazine *FHM*. While it is possible as a pro-sex feminist, to nevertheless mount a convincing argument against the intrusion of hypersexualized values into the world of early childhood, especially when it is little girls who are being addressed by these injunctions to have a sexy body prepuberty, and while one can surely see that these new markets also provide further opportunities for shoring up the heterosexual matrix, and for driving wedges in childhood between those girls who come to inhabit normative femininity with gusto and those who don’t, these arguments are more difficult to sustain after the age of consent. Perhaps an argument against what is happening is better conducted around the issue of how a triumphant neo-liberal popular culture defines and organizes a sexual world: who are the winners and the losers? How can a critique be mounted without lapsing into moralism and sexual conservatism? And if feminists do not step into the public arena to debate these issues, who will? The answer is usually new right or pro-chastity campaigns, or indeed Catholic schoolgirls like those who set up a group to oppose the *Playboy* logo being impregnated on children’s pens and school stationery.
Lisa Henderson’s article in this volume titled *Slow Love* offers something of an implicit response to this kind of scenario which is to refrain from contributing to moral panic and to recognize complexity and diversity in sexual practices. I also take her to be insisting on the existence of variation in sex and desire and thus to be wary of shutting things down and foreclosing on experiment and adventure in favor of the old hierarchies of heterosexual coupledom. I think what this might mean is that if there is a good deal of pornography now endlessly available at the click of the mouse, we need to inquire as to what that actually means for sexuality and for relationships? Perhaps instead of disparaging, from some ’70s or ’80s feminist outsider zone, that the ubiquitous hot lesbian scenes played out for male pleasure (e.g., the popular tabloid *Today* newspaper 21st August 2007 reports pop star Danni Minoque in lesbian romp, etc.) reflect only a triumphant extension of the heterosexual matrix, and the building of barriers between these fantasy scenes and the world of queer desires, Henderson might ask us to slow down on coming to this conclusion. She might also suggest that more attention be paid to the changes in how young women, who are not self-defined as queer, nevertheless, have a less rigid and less prescriptive idea of what it is to be heterosexual. Perhaps there is some fluidity around those borders that is not about bisexuality either but which point to some other reconfiguration of young women’s desires for each other without the wish for fixity within what is perceived of as the political world of queer. And then one would presumably argue that these kinds of fluid desires are picked up by and reworked by the commercial media. Let me set out some possible readings of the hot lesbian scenarios (ignoring the obvious point that this is a stage set for male consumption). We could suggest that what might be understood to be the realm of heterosexual femininity is itself now less homogenous than might be imagined. Maybe there is an undesignated zone opened up in these post-political times that permits a diversity of sexual pleasures and practices without the requirement to sign up to be queer or lesbian. Of course, this could be understood as being “lesbian while at college” or “only when drunk” and engaging in hedonistic leisure pursuits, or while immersed in youth subcultures, but it could just as easily be seen as pre-feminist and post-feminist at the same time. Pre-feminist in the sense of girls friendships having long had an emotional and sexual charge as homoeroticism, and post-feminist insofar as there is a refusal of any categories associated with the women’s movement. Alternatively, it could be understood as a field of female desires that shape up and take place outside and against the normative requirements to conform to specifically readable modes of femininity. Anita Harris argues that nowadays young women are expected to open up all of their secrets to the close scrutiny of any number of agencies and institutions, from parents to personal advisors,
counsellors, mentors, etc. (Harris, 2004). Taking part in same-sex relations without “coming out” is also a way of remaining illegible. What I am getting at is also something I recall from the days of feminist punk music and club scenes, a defiant refusal to accept preordained political labels made available by both leftist and feminist activists and theorists.

If readers wish for some more concrete idea of what I am conveying here, I would offer some quick examples. First, the award-winning novel *Morvern Callar* by Alan Warner and the film based on the book directed by Lynn Ramsay. Morvern Callar is a working-class girl, living in a rundown port town on the West Coast of Scotland, who has experienced long years of ecstasy-taking, associated with the rave and dance scenes, as well as heavy drinking, and for whom an erotic and intimate relationship with her girlfriend, is simply taken for granted. They are not lesbians, but they are sometimes, and they even perform as such with boys when they feel like it. They are each totally detached from ideas of motherhood or settling down and instead as the narrative unfolds, drift from the grey coldness of Scotland to the warmth of the Ibiza scene of casual sex, drugs, and endless partying. This novel and film tells us something important about white, working-class young women today. To anyone familiar with everyday life in the UK, including the girl-on-girl sex scenes, this is instantly recognizable. It is part of the social landscape, indeed part of the same social landscape described by Bott in her account of young, white, working-class girls leaving the north of England to work as lap dancers in Spain (Bott, 2007). Likewise, the current Burlesque scene in London hardly conforms to the old-fashioned strip club, since it is, it seems, a place of female audiences.5 So with these examples in mind, I am persuaded by Henderson’s argument about refusing to adopt a position of instant critique in regard to these aspects of contemporary sexual culture. We can instead propose that while there is possibly some repudiation of the label gay or lesbian for all of the reasons connecting with the vilification of feminism in popular culture today, there are also tensions and anxieties within heterosexual culture and indeed modes of refusing its demands through negotiation of other desires, within the spaces opened up through the apparent freedoms provided by the mainstreaming of pornography and the extension of sex entertainment, as well as the general encouragement to women to act on their own desires.

But this still raises the question for feminist responses. Henderson refers to the alternative sexual cultures that are now embedded in a wide number of cities and established as scenes for queer desires. The point I make is that either such urban scenes have some political credentials or else they are subcultural (as portrayed in the film *Paris Is Burning*), where the cultural world I am referring to is insistently apolitical (think of the film *Trainspotting*), or at least I would propose this to be the case,
after all the rave youth culture of the mid to late 1980s, along with the Tarantino-influenced and Irving Welsh and Damien Hirst-influenced heterosexual boys’ culture, spawned a conservative, anti so-called “political correctness” scene in the UK, where words like “women” were deemed political and replaced with the now ubiquitous “ladies” and where words like heterosexual or homosexual or queer likewise were too connected with politics or with the dreary world of academia, and sociology; hence, the reappearance with some gestures to irony of “poofers” or the emergence of the word post-gay being thrown about in the context of Burlesque and new club scenes. This suggests that the transposition of a vocabulary like that offered by Lisa Henderson as “slow love” might meet with some resistance on the part of the younger party girls, and there is the further question of where these two worlds, one adamantly apolitical, and the other of course defined in socio-political terms, might actually collide? The only immediate answer is inside the feminist academy where at least some percentage of these same party girls will nowadays encounter the ideas of pro-sex as well as pro-censorship feminists. But, as I have argued recently, a key strand of popular culture today, in particular on questions of sex and gender, establishes itself as a direct counter to the situated knowledge now embedded in the feminist curriculum (McRobbie, 2008). We might conclude then that despite the successes of feminism inside the university, and in curriculum construction, there are formidable forces that nevertheless seek to undo the claims of feminist academia on the attention and imagination of younger women.

That said, it might be useful to conclude these comments with a brief look back at “Thinking Sex” and then at the interview titled “Sexual Traffic” by Judith Butler with Gayle Rubin, on the basis that there was an agreement across the panel at the Barnard session at the ICA that Rubin’s work needed somehow to be revived (Butler & Rubin, 1994). What I take from Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” was among other things a full recognition of the array of forces concerned to undo the radical claims of feminism and gay and lesbian politics. Rubin offers, at a time when AIDS was only recently registering on the political horizon, an account of the investment on the part of the New Right and the Moral Majority and many other agencies, in establishing a united front against what was then referred to as sexual deviance, and the dangers posed therein. She pinpoints the phenomenon of the moral panic as the “political moment of sex,” she draws on the important work of Jeffrey Weeks and the only recently translated into English History of Sexuality, Volume One by Foucault. The article argues for a “radical theory of sex,” which would “denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression.” Rubin also rails against those moral hierarchies that locate “despised” groups such as transsexuals, fetishists, practitioners of S & M, sex workers, and porn models as the lowest of the
low. She acknowledges the value of the lives and desires of those who live in the “sexual underworld” and she draws attention to the limits of feminism in this regard. Then, years later interviewed by Judith Butler in 1994, Rubin reminds readers of how Marxist feminism had a “weak grasp of sex and gender” and could not provide a “theoretical basis for lesbianism.” She also repeats the point that the feminists she was working with in Ann Arbor insisted that prostitution was “a work issue like any other,” and that the pro-sex position she had been associated with for many years also emerged out of a reaction against tendencies inside lesbianism to embracing a kind of soft maternal, or friendship-based essentialism, and also a reaction against those elements within feminism that “condemned drag and cross dressing, gay public sex, gay male promiscuity, gay male masculinity. . . and just about everything else gay men did” (Butler & Rubin, 1994, p. 49). In short Rubin was upbraiding feminists for absorbing the “usual stigmas and common hatreds of certain non-normative sexual practice which they then rearticulated in their own framework” (Ibid., p. 51). Rubin put onto the political agenda fetishism and the love of rubber, silk stockings, leather trousers, and so on. In effect, what both she and Butler were doing here was reiterating the issues that would become part of the lesbian and gay studies curriculum. Rubin ends the interview with comments about the importance of empirical work and how it is frequently sidelined as “low-status, even stigmatized activity” in favor of “theory.” This is not surprising from an anthropologist but pertinent also to this discussion. I would argue that we need to know more ethnographically about what is going on inside contemporary sexual worlds that goes beyond reliance on newspaper reports, magazines, and sensational TV programs like *Ibiza Uncovered*. How fluid or impermeable are the boundaries between the sexual communities Rubin refers to, and the *Girls Gone Wild* scenes in which for young women the limits of heterosexuality are reached if only through the blur of drugs and alcohol? In a recent interview, the 23-year-old North London singer Amy Winehouse (whose troubles with drugs, alcohol, and aggressive behavior recently put her in the hospital, almost resulting in her death) said “I’m not a lesbian or at least not until I have had a few sambuccas.” The repudiation of the label speaks to us of what is still at stake for young people, in this case young women, in the achievement of heterosexual respectability. If the contemporary world of sex entertainment produces inadvertently, or touches upon, perhaps greater openness and fluidity than my comments at the ICA suggest, nevertheless a clear project for feminist scholarship today is to critically engage with the closures of sexual imagination and of “scenes” that are also perhaps the high cost of the legitimation of participation of young women, now deemed “up for it,” within a mainstream universe of sexual pleasures. That said, it is also the case that quietness
(though not quietude) on the part of women like myself now in their mid 50s, is not inseparable from a sense of decorum. No matter how much we challenge the timelines of generation (see Halberstam, 2005) inside and outside of queer, one is simply not doing the same pleasurable things, going to the same places, and dancing to the same kind of music, 20 years later. In conclusion, I would suggest younger women scholars working in the field of sexuality today might perhaps pay more attention to the interface of neo-liberal values surfacing within popular culture, with the seeming relaxation or liberalization of the heterosexual matrix, so that “lesbian” is simultaneously acknowledged and permitted, while also aggressively disavowed. We might even argue that female, same-sex desires are now channeled and given a performative space within these commercial scenes to which women as well as men now have access. The mainstreaming of pornography, as well as the wide availability of sex entertainment and the requirement that young women in their everyday sexual behavior comply with the criteria for being “hot,” or being like the Pussycat Dolls, introduces a new dynamic into the field of sexuality, which existing feminist vocabularies (despite the important work by Rubin, Mereck, and Butler) do not seem fully equipped to deal with.

NOTES

1. This was a 15-minute presentation on key issues for feminist cultural studies today.
2. There is a provocation factor directed at some nebulous notion of “feminism,” for example, on the London underground (October 2007) in a series of advertisements for cosmetic surgery. There are pictures of a young woman who starts off looking sad and unhappy but she becomes happier and happier thanks to the increasing size of her breasts which seem to get bigger as the viewer moves up the elevator.
3. In London in the last 6 months, there is a style for young women which is wearing very short pants (i.e., knickers) out on the street. These can be sequinned pants, or just plain cotton pants or even plaid or tartan pants, which are worn over tights in winter, and bare legs in summer.
5. See www.londonburlesquefest.com
6. See Amy Winehouse at www.amywinehouse.co.uk

REFERENCES


