

This is NOT a Love Story Libraries and Feminism

By Lisa Sloniowski

Two feminist researchers at York University have received three years of federal funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to study and archive feminist pornography. I am one of those researchers, and a librarian, and this is my story.

Once upon a time and indeed probably as recently as this very morning, access to pornography in libraries was a problematic issue that divided librarians from each other, from some members of our communities and from public library board trustees. The debate surfaced in both Windsor and London in the last few years surrounding proposals to install internet filters on public library computer terminals. Librarians have, for the most part, spoken out against filtering, not in defence of pornography so much as in opposition to censorship and to technology that is not robust enough to distinguish between searches for pornographic materials and “legitimate” enquiries for social and medical information on breast cancer, inter-racial or gay relationships, or STDs. We also ask who defines what is pornographic – it wasn't so long ago that all gay and lesbian material, for instance, was considered pornographic regardless of any explicitly sexual content.

In public libraries, the case against pornography is complicated by the presence of children in our stacks, and our desire to shield them from such material and/or from other patrons who may have malicious intent. Academic libraries have less of a concern about this issue as our patrons are (mostly) above the age of consent. Also, our communities of scholars are less likely than the general public to complain about the inclusion of pornographic materials in

our collections, recognizing that scholarly inquiry may take a variety of avenues. Nonetheless, the question of whether pornography objectifies women and alienates the feminist community is as relevant to academic libraries as it is to public libraries. Self-proclaimed radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine Mackinnon have historically joined hands with conservative judges, newspaper columnists, and Christian fundamentalists in the cause to fight the pornography industry. Do we risk alienating women by actively acquiring and preserving pornography? What will the Women's Studies department think? Is there any legitimate scholarly reason to collect this material? Do all feminists hate pornography?

Enter Feminist Porn: A Brief History

There is no unified perspective on pornography within the feminist community, despite media coverage which tends to emphasize the anti-porn side of what has proven to be an ongoing and arguably ruinous debate within the feminist community since at least the late 1970s. According to Dr. Bobby Noble, a York University Gender and Sexuality Studies professor and the principal investigator on this project: “There remains a fruitful and productive history of present feminist porn ... traceable in the work of late 1970s feminist porn workers such as Annie Sprinkle and the rest of the women from Club 90, and beyond the notorious American feminist sex wars, during which time feminist porn cultures and workers (not yet explicitly named as such) continued to do their work.” In a more contemporary and local context, a slightly unexpected hub recently emerged. For six years, a small, privately-owned feminist sex-toy shop in Toronto called “Good For Her” has been an advocate and organizing/distributing hub for contemporary work in feminist porn, in part by founding The Feminist Porn Awards (FPAs). This

Story: Feminist Porn



Photo Credit: From Made in Secret: The Story of the East Van Porn Collective.

event has rapidly grown into a three-day long carnivalesque celebration of feminist porn from across North America and internationally, an event that ends with an awards ceremony where (juried) awards are given out to porn stars, producers, distributors, directors and cast in a variety of categories mostly duplicating the star/celebrity system of both Hollywood and the mainstream porn business with some exceptions. The categories include “Hottie of the Year”; “Most Diverse Cast”; “Best Bi Film”; “Most Tantalizing Trans Film” “Sexiest Straight Movie”; “Hottest Kink Movie”; and “Movie of the Year”. Notably every year the number of films submitted for adjudication increases.

As Becki Ross, department chair of Women's and Gender Studies at UBC puts it in a recent interview with *The Ubyssy* (December 1, 2011): “The legacy of commercial straight porn is one of racism, heterosexism and phallocentrism—none of which carries a positive, enriching sexual charge for female viewers. Men have controlled pornscapes forever because they’ve owned the means of production, as Karl Marx would say.” She also states that “It’s time for lesbians, disabled women, fat women, trans women, elders and women of colour to seize opportunities to imagine sexual representation on our own terms — juicy, messy, hot and liberatory.”

It appears then that feminist porn has been in existence for at least 30 years, with production stepping up in recent years to meet an increasing demand. It is part of a vigorous conversation within the feminist community and yet, until recently, scholars have largely overlooked it and academic librarians have mostly not collected it. There are of course sexuality collections here and there, including most national libraries, the Human Sexuality collection at Cornell University, the Sexuality Studies collection at UofT and the new Kink collection at the Pride Library at Western University – but few if

form of cultural production requiring unique bibliographic treatment.

What is Feminist Porn? Are there Birkenstocks involved?

One of the first questions I am always asked when talking about this project is to define feminist porn, a juxtaposition of words that seems impossible at best. However it is the very unmooring of the word “feminist” from the anti-porn movement that drives this form of cultural production and indeed our project itself. In many ways we are less interested in what feminist porn ‘is’ than what it ‘does.’ We see it as an interdisciplinary set of multiple genres (not just film), each of which functions as an historical warehouse of images, debates, and cultural memory as well as important sites for the establishment, modification, preservation and investigation of feminist sexual-cultural practice.

Moreover, we see many of the texts/films as actively vexing the feminist conversation around pornography. Or to put it more directly, we see it as a kind of intervention into the ongoing divisive debates around pornography within the feminist community. Our collection of materials will attempt to document this strategy of ‘vexation’. That being said, on a very practical level, for the moment we are working with the same definition used by the Feminist Porn Awards, which suggest that the item must meet at least one 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

The Feminist Porn Archive and Research Project

Given the existence of sexuality studies, university programs, and degrees which are incorporating Porn Studies into the fields of knowledge production, the Feminist Porn Archive and Research Project (FPARP) recognizes and attempts to redress two major shortcomings. First, an infrastructural problem or the lack of collected, catalogued and contextualized pedagogical and research materials and secondly, the dearth of academic scholarship theorizing and documenting the histories, functions, importance, and sexual-social-political trends in feminist porn production. The project has three mutually constitutive research objectives, which happily allow for me as a librarian to operate as a scholar and practitioner on the project:

1. To research and explain what is going on in the porn itself
2. To create an archive of sorts – both a physical archive to preserve materials and a scholarly digital research portal where scholars and sex workers could discuss and analyze collected materials
3. To research the technologies/processes of archivization themselves, noticing the ways in which such technologies are socially embedded

What are we doing right now?

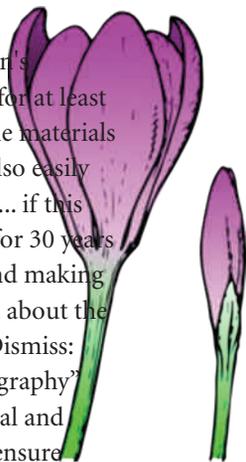
For the past year we have been engaged in preliminary reading, thinking, and writing about our emerging questions and problems, as well as travelling to relevant collections like the Museum of Sex and the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York City. We are speaking at academic conferences as there appears to be a great deal of interest in the project. We have a book idea that is simmering in the background and we are planting seeds for the digital hub by working with a graduate assistant to develop an online exhibit exploring feminist porn in relation to the feminist sex wars. We are not building the physical archive of materials until we have made decisions about where and how we'd like to situate it. A community based archive like the Canadian Gay and Lesbian archive? The institutional archives at York? A separate collection at York Libraries along the lines of the Pride Library at Western? Or a private museum of our own

making like the Museum of Sex in Manhattan?

Some of the emerging problems and research questions of the project include issues of classification – how to develop feminist and scholarly taxonomies for this material which also respects the play of bodies, sexualities, and genders at work with this form of cultural production. We struggle with issues of collection development – how do we define feminist porn, what materials are relevant for a scholarly collection, what are we missing? Other questions surround around how pornography as a concept is shaped by the legal system – for instance the quasi-criminalization of sex workers, obscenity laws, and age of consent laws. We also wonder, how accessible can we make our material collection without making staff or patrons uncomfortable? There will be complicated copyright issues if we decide to digitize it. Should we decide to keep it at York there are questions about how to deal with the diverse 'stakeholders' – students too young to legally view the material, or others like some of our anti-porn feminist colleagues who may vehemently oppose the library holding this material. As my research partner recently asked, "Is the academic corporate complex the 'right' site for such an archival fever? But more importantly ... what kinds of very important epistemological ruptures do we risk missing if we answer no to that question?"

Final Word

It would be easy enough from an academic librarian's perspective to just say that if this is a research area for at least some of our faculty and students, we need to get the materials in house or online to support their work. We can also easily point to this material as cultural/historical artifact ... if this form of cultural production has been in existence for 30 years or more surely somebody should be collecting it and making it accessible to scholars, regardless of one's opinion about the material? Or as Marcel Barriault asks in "Hard to Dismiss: The Archival Value of Gay Male Erotica and Pornography" (Archivaria, 2009) where he argues for the evidential and informational value of pornography, "How do we ensure





archives as bodies of knowledge also reflect knowledge of the body?” Or as Noble suggested to me, “Isn't this an opportunity to archive what is rendered unintelligible in public discourse that which anti-porn feminist discourse in particular has held as sacred, truthful and unmediated: relations of intimacy?”

But for those interested in exploring scholarly questions emerging from their practice of librarianship, attempting to build a feminist porn archive also creates a perfect opportunity to investigate the ways in which our institutional practices play a role not only in the preservation of diverse material but in the actual production of cultural histories. Our omissions, our classification schemas, our policies and practices so often seem the product of daily exigency rather than as hegemonic actions that invariably exclude certain lived experiences while fixing others into place. At the same time, library and archival collections may also be approached as sites integral to the destabilization of subjects. These contradictions fascinate me, and while some have studied the problems of incorporating feminist materials into libraries, and others have explored the difficulties of making pornography accessible, I am taking a certain delight in bringing feminism and porn together as a perfect storm, both sexing, and vexing, the library.

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Since 2006 Lisa Sloniowski has been the English Literature Liaison Librarian at York University Libraries and has recently been appointed chair of York Libraries' Special Collections Working Group. In 2009 Lisa co-founded the Feminist Pornography Archive and Research Project with Dr. Bobby Noble, Associate Professor of Sexuality and Gender Studies in the School of Women's Studies. This project was awarded a Social Science and Humanities Research Council standard research grant in 2010. Lisa has been an intermittent member of the CLA, the OLA and APLA, and is currently a member of the Canadian Association for Cultural Studies, and the Canadian Women's Studies Association.

