

Pornography's Feminist Uses

A Conversation

LYNN COMELLA AND DESIRAE EMBREE

Pornography and its uses have been topics of heated debate among feminist activists and scholars since the 1970s. Is porn inherently exploitative or can it be a source of empowerment? Is it possible for feminist entrepreneurs and cultural producers to use the sexual marketplace for radical purposes, or are their projects limited, and perhaps even doomed, by the logic of a capitalist industry defined largely by and for men?

In this wide-ranging conversation, sexuality scholars Lynn Comella and Desirae Embree discuss the complex and often contradictory uses to which American feminists have put pornography in the last 50 years. Drawing upon their respective research on the history of feminist sex-toy stores and the dyke pornography industry, they push back against the explanatory limits of the empowerment versus exploitation narrative, while simultaneously calling on researchers to explore the messy and often untamed cultural and commercial spaces occupied by sex-positive feminist and queer cultural producers and pornographers.

Desirae Embree (DE): One of the things I feel comes out of your work is a very balanced perspective on the various uses to which feminism has put pornography. Often the narrative around feminism and pornography tends to settle into a pro- and anti-framework in which, on the pro-side, pornography is seen as a means of sexual empowerment. On the anti-side, it's seen as a means of oppressing women and keeping them sexually subjugated on both an individual and collective level. What I appreciate so much about your work is that you take a more complex view of it on both a small and large scale, particularly because you're dealing with economies, businesses, and various enterprises that extend beyond the purely political. But *Vibrator Nation* really shows that there are all kinds of uses that might follow from these two broad camps, which are really the feminist sex wars' legacy.

Lynn Comella (LC): It's always interesting to hear people talk about your work and describe what they get out of it, so thank you. I think we sometimes end up in places with our research not necessarily because we thought we'd end up there, but by following the data. That's what ethnographers do. We start with what are hopefully good research questions, and then we continue to refine and sharpen our questions as we learn from the field and as we learn from our interviewees. To be honest, I didn't start out with any intention of studying pornography. That

was a direct outgrowth of studying the world of feminist sex-toy stores. It just so happened that some, although not all, of these stores had erotic video collections that included more educationally oriented porn like *How to Female Ejaculate* (1992) and the *Bend Over Boyfriend* series (1998, 2000). These films piqued my curiosity, and I began thinking about how they fit with the larger educational missions of the feminist and queer businesses I was studying.

I kind of fell into porn studies, really, because when you're studying retail businesses, you are also looking at the kinds of products they sell and how decisions are made about what items to carry. Porn was part of the product mix for many feminist sex shops, and it was also part of the stories I was hearing from many of my interviewees: people like Susie Bright, who started the erotic video collection at Good Vibrations in 1989, and Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano, who founded SIR Video in the late 1990s. The porn piece of my larger project was just kind of there, staring me in my face, and I needed to think about how feminist retailers approached, and in some cases resisted, engaging with pornography and its uses, because it was ultimately part of the story of these businesses.

To go back to your question, though, I think it's really worth discussing the ease with which women's relationship not just to porn but to sex work and to the sexual marketplace more broadly gets collapsed into either a form of empowerment or a form of exploitation. That's the go-to default, and I think it's so lazy. I really became aware of the extent to which it's the default as I began to do more media engagement and began speaking with journalists who were contacting me to get my take on some aspect of the adult industry, whether that was pornography or strip club culture or something related to the sexual economy in Las Vegas, which is where I live. It got to the point where I could almost predict their first question: "In your opinion, is [fill in the blank] empowering or disempowering for women." I finally just stopped even trying to answer that question, and I would instead say, "Let me tell you what I think is interesting about the story that it sounds like you're writing." I just began sidestepping the question altogether as opposed to spending 10 minutes explaining to them why I didn't think it was a very good or interesting question to begin with.

I don't think we've begun to dislodge, really at all, the degree to which discourses of empowerment versus exploitation continue to be the dominant framework for examining women's relationship to sex. I think this speaks to the enduring legacy of not just the feminist sex wars, but the power of the anti-pornography position to shape and define cultural narratives around pornography. I think you're correct that this narrative still operates today, but it flattens out so much of the complexity of our lived experiences and realities. As an ethnographer, I don't theorize things abstractly. Rather, I try to understand how people narrate and make sense of their worlds. I'm listening closely to how people talk about the cultural universes they inhabit, and I'm trying to understand the complexities and contradictions that define their worlds. I think when you approach research this way, you have to abandon any easy, simplistic explanations for understanding cultural phenomena, practices, and beliefs, because those easy explanations just don't work. Complicating the rigid binary of empowerment versus exploitation

was a byproduct of my research and a byproduct of a methodological approach that allowed me to see just how complicated and contradictory the space between those rigid poles is. As a researcher, I've always been intrigued by those complicated and arguably messy spaces.

DE: I love your point that if you are asking good research questions and you have a good, responsible research methodology that has integrity, that it won't actually allow you to produce a narrative that fits neatly into those poles. I had the exact same experience. I remember when I started my project on the dyke pornography industry—which represented the first time in history that lesbians were creating their own commercial sex media—I still didn't know exactly what I was writing about because I hadn't seen any of the videos I was studying. Until recently, it was very, very difficult to see them. You had to go to an archive across the country. But in my dissertation proposal, I was approaching this industry from the empowerment perspective. I thought that women like Suzanne Meyers (who performed in mainstream adult film under the name Chris Cassidy), Debi Sundahl, and Nan Kinney were liberated feminist heroes who had empowered their audiences by going against the feminist orthodoxy at the time. And I remember my committee telling me that my job wasn't to be an uncritical champion of these women or these texts. My job was to find out all of the nuance and the complexity suggesting that the empowerment narrative—even as it was explicitly adopted by many of the women involved in the industry—might not have been an accurate description of what was happening.

And I *did* have to take a more nuanced perspective once I got into the archive and started looking at all of the actual, physical materials related to these videos, their production, and the lives of the women who made them. All of the complexity and messiness of navigating different experiences that result from being a woman or a queer person in the world... they were just sort of there, in the archival record.

The women at Fatale Video, one of the first dyke porn production companies, really *did* see making those videos as a way of empowering women by freeing them from sexual shame, giving them ideas about what pleasure could look like in their lives, and giving them permission to go explore that pleasure *as feminists*. But also, when you look through the business records, it was not a wholly empowering experience for *them*. They experienced a lot of disempowerment not necessarily because of pornography or sexual representation but because of the context around the act of creating sex media and products. There was so much to navigate and that really took a lot out of them both in terms of material resources and in terms of emotional energy. It taxed a lot of their relationships. It was not an uncomplicated project, either politically or personally, for them. And I really started refining my thinking about how complicated this question is, particularly for women and queer people, with Carole Vance's edited collection *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. It was published in 1984, and so it's situated squarely within the sex wars. As someone writing in a 21st century context, it just kind of blew my mind, that in the midst of what was probably the most polarized feminist debate in history, there was *Pleasure and Danger* arguing

that women's lived sexual experience is one that's marked by both empowerment *and* disempowerment. You cannot disentangle pleasure from danger, and what's more, their co-existence is not necessarily a bad thing. It just is the condition of our sexuality, of how we live in the world. So, I'm interested in your point when you say that as you get these media requests that people seem to really want you to validate that polarization between exploitation and empowerment, because it actually seems like we haven't taken up the nuance that was provided for us by so many of the people writing during the sex wars.

LC: That framework operates so powerfully in the world of journalism because it operates so powerfully in the world. I'm really glad you brought up that priceless, indispensable collection *Pleasure and Danger*, which came out of the 1982 Barnard Conference. It's such a touchstone for me. One of the things that was so groundbreaking and remains so important about that collection, I think, is the extent to which, right out of the gate in the introduction, Vance points to the lived complexity of women's sexual desires and experiences. Here it is, so many years later, and feminist researchers, writers, and activists are still having to make that case. We're still having to talk about, write about, and theorize the lived, embodied space of complexity. This is the case when it comes to sex workers, when it comes to the world of pornography, when it comes to the world of consent. It's interesting for me to reflect on the years that have passed since I started my dissertation in the early 2000s and think about how much the field of porn studies and research on sexual economies have grown. And yet, if you pare back all of the growth of the field, the larger culture still lags behind.

I say that in part because the empowerment versus exploitation narrative has enjoyed decades and decades of dominance despite the work that's being done to examine and theorize these rich spaces of complexity. So many of the people that I admire and look up to in the field, and who I'm proud to call colleagues and friends, occupy this space as researchers, thinkers, and interlocutors with the popular press. They are doing really important work to push the larger culture to think differently about spaces of complexity that are often overshadowed by those who reduce the complicated terrain of sex to either/or binaries: good/bad, acceptable/unacceptable, empowering/exploitative. Sex and sexuality continue to be domains of social and cultural life in which binaries operate quite powerfully, and many people are very comfortable being reductive about sex in ways that they wouldn't necessarily be with other domains of social and cultural life. That's interesting to me.

DE: I wonder what it is that is so seductive about binaries when it comes to sex, generally, and pornography, specifically? What is it that invites us to disregard decades of really complicated work, both in academic scholarship and in popular press, and to fall back on to the either/or?

LC: That's a really interesting question, and I immediately go back to *Pleasure and Danger*. One of my favourite essays in that collection is Gayle Rubin's "Thinking

Sex.” Your question is a complicated one that would involve me being more of a psychologist of the national psyche to answer, but I think at the end of the day many people find comfort in Rubin’s idea of the charmed circle. I think even for people who live their lives outside the charmed circle, whose sexual practices don’t resemble those that define the charmed circle, they also find refuge in the idea of it, which is why I think we see so many politicians leading double lives in terms of how they present themselves to the public and how they live behind closed doors. The charmed circle is *still* an incredibly seductive ideological framework for thinking about how cultural ideas and discourses around sex operate.

DE: I like the idea you bring up that there is comfort within the charmed circle for those whose identities and sexual practices might not fall within it, because I think about this all the time given that my research focuses on 1980s lesbian sex radicals—people who were part of marginalized sex cultures, who undertook marginalized sex practices. One of the things that always strikes me is how quickly those cultures settled into their own norms. They had their own cultural norms, and they had their own cultural rituals that in time became doctrinaire. And at the same time, their identity was built on being on the outside, being in opposition to things like the doctrinaire and the normative. I’m constantly going back and forth, trying to make sense of what was—and what is still in many ways—a truly radical sex culture.

I’m interested to know whether you think this is still the case, but making pornography in the 1980s *was* one of those radical sex practices. When women like Candida Royalle, Sundahl, Kinney, and Meyers started making sex films, it was a radical sex practice, but it was a radical economic practice too. They weren’t just consuming or performing in sex films, they were taking advantage of consumer technology in order to be producers—to be pornographers! But I wonder, do you see it as being similar today? Do you think it is still the case that when someone like Shine Louise Houston, a queer woman of colour, or Courtney Trouble, a fat- and trans-identified person, create sexual imagery and then sell it online to a consumer base—does it still have that radical element to it the way that it did in the 1980s?

LC: Clearly the historical moment is different, and the context is different. There are different conversations happening around pornography today than there were in the 1980s. But I think anytime that women, queer people, and other marginalized people harness the means of production via images and words to create alternative messaging around sex, it’s radical. I still believe that even though it’s 2021 and not 1984—which, as we know, is not only the year that *Pleasure and Danger* came out, but it’s also the year that *On Our Backs* [OOB] published its first issue, the year Candida Royalle founded Femme Productions, and the year Fatale Video got its start. Yet despite cultural shifts and changes, including having more space in the wider culture for sex-positive ideas and discourses, we can’t discount the extent to which society remains overwhelmingly sex negative. Anytime sex-positive cultural producers can carve out space for their work it

is, I think, a radical act, because they are working against cultural forces that would otherwise prefer these things didn't exist. The cultural forces that *OOB*'s founders were pushing against in 1984 are different than what someone like Shine Louise Houston might be pushing against today, but all of us who do this work, as researchers or as cultural producers, are still pushing against a culture of sex negativity and sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, as well as anti-queer, anti-trans sentiments. These things are still very real.

DE: We could kind of arbitrarily break that into two questions. One is about the radical potential of creating alternative, sex-positive images inside of a sex-negative culture—so the question of representation there and what representation can do politically and ideologically. And the other is a question that I don't think we ask enough, which is about the radical potential of marginalized people appropriating media technologies and inserting themselves into media economies. I think that we often forget how radical it is that a woman even picked up a camera. It is easy to forget how recent, historically speaking, it was that women—or any other marginalized group—gained unfettered access to moving image technologies that would *allow* them to create alternative images. And you're right that adult filmmakers are working within a different historical context now, but what's interesting is the extent to which they are still required to be resistant subjects. If you aren't part of a socially dominant group, then creating these images and seizing the means of production in order to do so is always going to require resisting the dominant social organization of both capital and ideology.

LC: There's so much that can be said about the power of images. Thinking about that watershed year, 1984, it's important to remember just how little space there was in the culture for women to speak about and name their desires. There were definitely feminist and queer cultural producers who saw the radical potential of creating erotic and pornographic images that featured women's desires and bodies, but it was also a way to push back against anti-pornography forces. I think it's fair to say that much of the inspiration for *OOB* was the anti-pornography movement. I'm not sure *OOB* would have emerged at that point in time or looked the way it did without anti-pornography feminism informing the images as a counterpoint and in-your-face response. One of the things I realized early on in my research on feminist sex-toy stores is the extent to which cultural producers are always, explicitly or implicitly, in conversation with the thing that they set themselves against.

OOB was at times quite explicit about the counternarrative it was putting forth, but it didn't always have to be explicit to still be in conversation with anti-pornography feminism. The magazine was a very concrete, pragmatic, material intervention. You could pick it up. You could open it up. You could turn the pages. You could look at the images with the knowledge that someone was creating them with the purpose of making a statement about lesbian sexuality and desire by bringing new kinds of sexual images into the world.

It also seems to me that a lot of writers who were at the time reviewing *OOB* and the other lesbian erotic magazines that came out in the early 1980s were struggling to find a language to talk about what these magazines even *were*. There was such a dearth of explicit imagery and sexual language for naming and claiming queer female desire that some of these reviewers didn't have the words to talk about what *OOB* even was. It was groundbreaking in its efforts to create a repertoire of radical lesbian sexual imagery, but it was also, simultaneously, helping to create a new linguistic field for naming and representing lesbian desires.

DE: This is something I'm thinking about a lot right now, as I'm writing a chapter that specifically deals with *OOB* and *Fatale Video*, which were sister companies. The chapter thinks about that image repertoire, as well as how they combined a variety of aesthetic influences in order to construct discursively a zone that was not just specifically lesbian but specifically *dyke*. In the 1970s, cultural feminist discourses of sexuality that naturalized women's sexuality created the template *against which* dyke pornographers were really pushing. In the 1970s feminist artists like Barbara Hammer or Tee Corrinne were representing women's sexuality through visual metaphors that likened it to fruit, flowers, or the landscape, and, to be clear, in its own moment that was also really radical in that it was trying to find, like you said, a language for claiming women's desire.

But a decade later *OOB* and its contemporaries appear, and it seems like their reaction was to say "No, you know what? Our sexuality is artificial, it's constructed, it's commercial, it's enabled by all of these technologies, it's enabled by sex businesses, it's enabled by sexual entertainment. It's manicured, it's shaved, it's pierced, it's tattooed, it's ritualized." There really was a rejection of the cultural feminist ideal of woman-as-nature and women's sexuality as an expression of nature.

I hadn't thought about it in quite the terms that you put it, which is that cultural producers are always in conversation with the thing that they're pushing back against. And *OOB* is, of course, the perfect example of that because its very name was a jab at the feminist anti-pornography newspaper *off our backs*. But it's really interesting how many of the women in that first generation of feminist pornography started their political lives *as anti-pornography feminists*. I think that goes back to your point about the lived complexity of our sexuality. Even the political lens through which we read our desires can change over time, and that's a whole new level of complexity. Debi Sundahl actually said in an interview that when she and Nan Kinney were involved with the anti-porn movement in Minneapolis, they firebombed an adult store. That image of these two dyke pornographers firebombing an adult store—how do we understand that moment and that aesthetic image if we are looking at it through the image repertoire that they created? In many ways their entire career was a version of that act—throwing a Molotov cocktail at the establishment, whether that was the mainstream adult entertainment industry or the lesbian feminist orthodoxy.

LC: Exactly. Regarding the second question you proposed above, capitalism and consumerism are also areas of social and cultural life in which complexity often gets flattened out. It's not just the idea that porn is harmful, it's also that the world of pornography is understood by many as being populated by predatory male capitalists. In other words, pornography is not just a set of representations or ideas about pleasure and danger, it also is a set of commercial practices. It's hard to parse through all the complicated layers around women and capitalism, feminism and capitalism, and sex and capitalism. That was one of the biggest tensions I tried to disentangle in *Vibrator Nation*: the ways in which many sex store owners and employees were constantly trying to find their footing within a capitalist system that they were fundamentally uncomfortable with. Many of my interviewees proudly claimed the sex piece of their work, but not the money part. Sex, as we know, can be a really difficult cultural space for women and girls to inhabit without shame, and here were these women stepping into that space without any shame or stigma or apologies, who were pushing cultural boundaries by selling sex toys and talking openly about sex. But they didn't have the same kind of chutzpah when it came to capitalism. Many people I interviewed were trying to keep consumer capitalism at bay at the very same time they were squarely located within it. That's perhaps the thing many of my interviewees struggled with the most. And it wasn't that they were struggling only with their sense of self and the label "businessowner" or "capitalist"; they were also struggling with being part of a system that's often set in opposition to progressive politics. The dominant narrative is that you can be either a feminist or you can be a capitalist, but you can't be both—or be both successfully. The stereotype is that women aren't supposed to care about money. They're supposed to be nurturers and caregivers. They're supposed to volunteer for good causes, and if they do venture into the world of business, especially if their goal is to do good in the world, they're not supposed to profit from that work. That was a refrain I heard again and again in my research: "We have a social mission. Our mission is about more than commerce. Yet, we have to be commercially viable in order to advance our mission." So, it's an endless loop. That was an ongoing challenge for the majority of businesses that I wrote about in *Vibrator Nation*, and I know it was also an ongoing challenge for scrappy do-it-yourself enterprises like *OOB* and other lesbian and queer production companies that followed in their footsteps, like SIR Video.

Honestly, I am in awe of any marginalized individual who says "I have a vision, and I am going to pursue this idea as a business venture. And I am going to do it even though there is no existing space in the culture for me to sit." Take *OOB* for example: there wasn't an existing marketplace for lesbian porn in 1984. Instead, the magazine's founders were like, "We are going to break open these boxes in terms of the content and images we are creating, and we're going to figure out how to do this in a commercial space where this really hasn't been done before and where there's no infrastructure to support it. We're going to create these images knowing that we're going to get blowback—knowing that we're going to have to push back, every day, against people writing us hate mail and bookstores refusing to carry our magazines—but we are also going to figure out a distribution model

because none exists.” So it’s like, figuring out how to do all these things at once because there is no model. You’re creating radical sexual imagery at the same time that you’re trying to establish a path forward in a marketplace that’s not designed for you, because the idea of porn for women, of lesbian porn, was laughable to many mainstream adult industry folks. That’s something Candida Royalle talked about when I interviewed her years ago. Her biggest challenge wasn’t making porn for women but figuring out how to get her videos into stores because nobody understood what she was doing. They didn’t understand the concept of porn for women or porn for couples. They didn’t understand her box covers, and they didn’t understand why her price point was higher than other videos they were selling. Creating the images was, in some ways, the easy part. Figuring out the marketplace, which includes distribution, advertising, marketing—all of that stuff—that was the hard part.

DE: One of the things I constantly return to as I’m thinking through this question about the marketplace is one night in 1984, when the *OOB* folks throw a strip show at a San Francisco lesbian bar called the Baybrick Inn. Debi Sundahl was a dancer at the O’Farrell Theater and the Lusty Lady, and so she brought lesbian dancers from those venues in as entertainment. Gayle Rubin actually deejayed! And they used the money from the strip show to produce the first issue of *OOB*, to get it printed. I think a lot about that party being the reason the magazine was able to get off the ground and how the magazine was largely sustained by the passion and ingenuity that made that first issue happen. These were not people who had any formal training in print publication. Debi had some experience working on the newsletter for Samois, the San Francisco leatherdyke collective, so she had a little bit of experience. But to your point about these being DIY operations, these women were really learning how to use these technologies *as* they were creating their products, and they became savvy businesswoman *as* they pieced together their business.

One of the things that allowed *OOB* to exist and to stay financially solvent, or close to it, for so long was that they were such early adopters of technologies like the Mac. They got a Mac in 1984, when the first consumer model was released, and they did everything from the second issue onward using desktop publishing. There were all of these technological developments that had to happen in order for them to be able to blaze this trail, but there also had to be political shifts in terms of the organization of capital and politics, which feminism made happen. I think we can easily forget that women weren’t even allowed to have credit cards in their own name until 1974 when the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed. So, it’s only ten years before that landmark year—1984—that women are even able to take out a line of credit in their own name. That’s incredible to think about. If you look at that moment, and where the adult film industry is, there’s a disparity between this business, which was booming and flourishing, and where women were allowed to be huge stars, but women can’t even get a line of credit in their own names, so how are they supposed to be making these products themselves?

Dyke pornographers did not have the same kind of ambivalent relationship to capitalism that it sounds like feminist sex-toy businesses did. Part of that is that many of them were already coming out of sex work. I'm thinking about Tigress Productions' founder Suzanne Meyers, who had performed in hundreds of Golden Age films under the name Chris Cassidy, or Lavender Blue's Gene Damage, who was also an adult film performer. These women didn't have an ambivalent relationship to feminist politics, sex, or money, because they had already been living at that intersection. It's interesting to think about how women might come to these projects through different avenues.

LC: People's relationship to the capitalist piece of the feminist puzzle is very much influenced by their position to privilege. It's certainly something that folks who worked at Good Vibrations over the years pushed back against when they heard co-workers with greater resources talk about money not mattering while they were struggling to pay their rent in pricey San Francisco. When I talk about the struggles some of my research subjects had with being located so squarely within capitalism at the same time that they wanted to tear capitalism down, I think there's this sense, still, that to do good activism or to be a good political actor you need to keep commerce and capitalism at bay because otherwise it taints your project. Part of the struggle is, I think, a desire that many people have to be seen as being pure in their politics and activism.

DE: In a previous conversation, you said something that has stuck with me, which is that that capitalism is, among other things—including, I would say, a system of exploitation—a system of meaning. It made me think of something that Joseph Slade has said, which is that “in a capitalist system...culture is synonymous with commerce. Whether one speaks of public or intimate information, ideas circulate to the degree that they can be packaged and sold.” I think that really gets at something unique about pro-sex feminist businesses, which is that they were really the only way that, at the time, radically new ideas about women's sexuality could be not just circulated but understood. Shopping in a sex-toy store, ordering a video from a mail-order catalog, subscribing to a magazine—these were social interactions that people already understood and were comfortable with.

LC: It's a provocative idea to think about: culture being synonymous with commerce. I think culture certainly can't be easily separated from commerce and, conversely, commerce can't be easily separated from culture. That's why I often describe my research as being situated within a larger framework of cultural studies of sexual commerce, because I'm really interested in systems of meaning and representation. One of the things I was trying to do in *Vibrator Nation*, to the extent that I was or was not successful, and I think different readers might have different opinions about that, but I was trying to make the case that consumer capitalism is malleable and that the sexual marketplace, like other forms of culture, is a system of meaning that can be reworked to do and communicate different things. I mean, that's the entire premise of cultural studies, right? Culture

is a system of meanings that can be articulated and rearticulated in different ways. So, if we agree with post-structuralist theories of discourse and meaning, then it makes sense that we would try to think about the ways in which different social actors, in different moments in time, have attempted to tap into and rework the meanings of consumer culture and consumer capitalism to do different things—whether that’s advancing sex education or ideas about sex positivity or whatever. So, the idea that culture is synonymous with commerce, as Slade contends, particularly in a place like the United States, which is such a hyper- and crass capitalist society, is interesting to think about. But also, what might it look like to imagine a kinder, gentler, and more ethical system of consumer capitalism in which the world of sex and sexual commerce might exist?

DE: What’s kind of disheartening about that question is the extent to which effecting the kind of change you’re describing is always dependent on one’s ability to flourish within the marketplace as it currently exists. I’m thinking about companies like *Fatale* or *Tigress*, which were helmed by women who were trying to use, as you’re saying, consumer capitalism as a vehicle for cultural change. But they were always doing so from a position that was already constrained economically. You’ve also mentioned this before, that so many of these feminist sex businesses were failed capitalist projects.

LC: Right. It’s the problem of the perpetually under-capitalized feminist capitalist, right? What does it mean to try to be a capitalist when you are perpetually under-capitalized?

DE: That’s an excellent way to put it. One of the things I say about dyke pornography is that this is a story about women’s economic containment and the effect that has on their attempts at sexual empowerment. These were not wealthy women, and they were never able to secure large investors for their projects. They operated outside of the mainstream industry, creating their own distribution networks, using their own production materials, relying on their immediate community’s labour, sacrificing their own salaries, and often putting their own money into companies that were rarely profitable if they were profitable at all. They were continuously operating in debt, mortgaging and second mortgaging their homes. When I interviewed her, I asked Nan Kinney why in the late 1990s she transitioned *Fatale* out of production and into distribution. She said, “I was getting older. I needed to retire. I needed some money so I could support myself. I couldn’t make porn forever.” And I heard that from several other women too.

They *did* effect a significant amount of cultural change. I live in rural Texas, and I drive past a feminist sex store every day, which would not exist without the feminist entrepreneurs that you study in your book. They did shift the culture so much. They revolutionized what was possible for women’s sex lives, and they revolutionized what was possible for women-owned sex businesses. And yet they just weren’t able to keep their companies—or even themselves, in some instances—afloat. That was enormously taxing.

LC: It reminds me of a set of images of Debi Sundahl in the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell. It was a contact sheet from a photoshoot she had right before she left San Francisco for Santa Fe. She's naked, and her hair is wild. They are very dramatic images, almost like a piece of experimental performance art. The title of the set, dated 1994, is "Meltdown of a Stripper," and attached to it is a handwritten note on a notecard that reads: "DS sold magazine, divorce, end of life in Marin County. A 'death of an era.'"

The photos really seem to capture a complete emotional collapse, and it made me wonder—and I've always wondered about this—about the emotional toll it took on these women to constantly do battle against various sex-negative cultural forces, including anti-pornography feminists, and, at the same time, put all of this energy into making sure there was enough money in their bank account to pay their employees and vendors. Those images of Debi really symbolized to me the end point of a failed capitalist project. It also makes me wonder how different Debi's life, or the life of *OOB*, might have been if the world of venture capitalism had existed then like it does today. What if some sex-positive philanthropist had come along and said: "The world needs more lesbian porn and we need you to make it. How much money do you need? Here's a blank check."

DE: I find your suggestion that what they really needed was an angel investor very interesting. *OOB* had a huge coup in the early 1990s when they got Absolut Vodka as an advertiser. From the early 1990s until the magazine ended for good, Absolut had a full-page colour ad on the back of the magazine. That was the first, and, really, only, major corporate advertiser that any dyke porn project had, and when I asked Nan and Debi about it, they said that it was the only reason they were able to do the magazine as long as they did. That ad alone paid for printing the entire issue. It really does show you just how powerful having that kind of financial backing could have been. That these companies kept creating products for so long *without* that financial backing just really shows that they were tenacious as hell.

LC: I agree, and I think that tenacity really needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. The uphill battles these women experienced, and the emotional scars those battles often left, were real. Celebrating their contributions doesn't mean that we uncritically put feminist trailblazers or their projects on pedestals, but rather it means that as researchers we commit ourselves to telling their stories in all of their messiness. This includes fully fleshing out the ways in which women occupy deeply complex and often contradictory relationships to feminism, sex, and capitalism. It also means being willing to write about not only their successes but their failures too. That's the kind of feminist research on pornography and the sexual marketplace that excites me the most: the messy, untamed, and multi-vocal stories that can't be easily reduced to neat and tidy either/or narratives and explanations. Those are the stories I most want to read.