

Feminist Collections

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CONTENTS

<i>From the Editors</i>	ii
 <i>Feminist Visions</i>	
Breaking Quarantine: Complicating Our Concepts of Pornography <i>by Nora Stone</i>	1
 <i>Feminist Archives</i>	
The Letters of Anne Whitney: Using Archives in Digital Scholarship <i>by Jenifer Bartle</i>	6
 <i>Book Reviews</i>	
Is Feminism Really Dead? Or Has It Just Become Too Fast to Catch and Gone Too Gaga to Spot? <i>by Tiffany Lee</i>	10
Inclusive Feminist Activism? Yes, Please! <i>by Lachrista Greco</i>	12
Feminism, “Women’s Magazines,” and <i>The New Yorker</i> <i>by Teresa D. Kemp</i>	14
Sexuality & Africa <i>by Cherod Johnson</i>	16
King vs. Laqueur: Sex and Texts in Ancient and Early Modern Europe <i>by Suzanna Schulert</i>	19
Concepts & Disciplines: A Reference Work on Gender <i>by Nina Clements</i>	22
<i>E-Sources on Women & Gender</i>	23
<i>Periodical Notes: New & Newly Noted Periodicals</i>	25
<i>Books Recently Received</i>	27
<i>Subscription Form for GWSL Publications</i>	29

FEMINIST VISIONS

BREAKING QUARANTINE: COMPLICATING OUR CONCEPTS OF PORNOGRAPHY

by Nora Stone

Anne G. Sabo, *AFTER PORNIFIED: HOW WOMEN ARE TRANSFORMING PORNOGRAPHY & WHY IT REALLY MATTERS*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books/John Hunt Publishing, 2012. 245p. notes. pap., \$22.95, ISBN 978-1780994802.

Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, & Mireille Miller-Young, eds., *THE FEMINIST PORN BOOK: THE POLITICS OF PRODUCING PLEASURE*. New York: Feminist Press, 2013. 432p. pap., \$22.95, ISBN 978-1558618183.

MUTANTES (PUNK PORN FEMINISM). 91 mins. 2009. Directed by Virginie Despentes. Distributed by Alive Mind Cinema. Purchase: \$21.21 for DVD or \$9.95 for download at <http://alivemindcinema.com>.

I LOVE YOUR WORK. 6 hours. 2013. Directed by Jonathan Harris. Streaming online at <http://iloveyourwork.net>. Purchase: 24-hour pass for \$10.00; or three 24-hour passes plus a 13" x 19" limited-edition archival print of *I Love Your Work*, signed by director Harris, for \$300.00. To stage a screening, email concept to screenings@iloveyourwork.net.

With the explosive popularity of E. L. James's erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its follow-ups, along with excitement about its 2015 film adaptation, mainstream American culture would seem to be becoming more accepting of women consuming sexually explicit media. The numerous think-pieces about the book's craze, however, often pointed out that *Fifty Shades* was a Kindle bestseller, the kind of thing that women don't want to be seen reading. Thus, in many communities, there is a disjuncture between what we want to read or watch and what we want to be seen reading or watching.

This ambivalence is even sharper with regard to sexually explicit audiovisual material — otherwise known as pornography. Although there is a wider range of sexual representation on television and in film than ever before (including on premium cable series such as *Looking* and *Masters of Sex*, and in the French *cinéma du corps*), pornog-

raphy remains quarantined in its own space — a radioactive political issue rather than a genre. The mainstream media generally treats pornography with suspicion, with most of its attention going to the horrors of internet porn addiction. Myriad news stories and articles imply, either implicitly or explicitly, that the easy availability of porn is bad for women because it infects the brains of their husbands or scars their children.

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In their own way, each of the following materials combats these assumptions by focusing on the variety of women who participate in the porn industry and the variety of work they

make. Anyone with a monolithic concept of pornography, the pornography industry, or the pornography audience will soon have that idea complicated by any one of these works.

Anne G. Sabo's *After Pornified: How Women are Transforming Pornography and Why It Really Matters* is a straightforward study of porn made by women. Sabo's starting point is journalist Pamela Paul's book *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Families, and Our Relationships* (Henry Holt, 2005), which blamed the wide availability of pornography for numerous social and psychological problems. Rather than respond to that blanket accusation, Sabo wants to back the conversation up to a more basic question about what porn is and can be.

Picking up where Linda Williams's 1989 landmark study, *Hard Core: Pleasure, Power, and the "Frenzy of the*

Visible,” left off, Sabo posits that female directors and producers have the power to radically revise the dynamics of porn, thereby affecting viewers positively rather than negatively. Sabo’s

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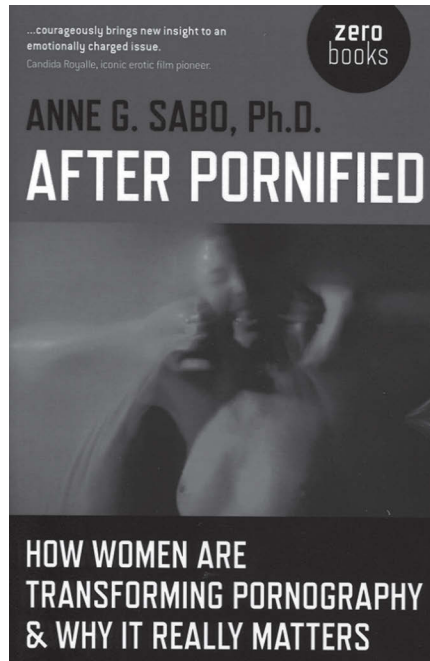
criteria for this re-vision of porn are twofold: high cinematic production values and progressive sexual-political commitment. Enfolded within those two criteria are a number of normalizing ideas about what makes a film good — realistic settings and costume, flattering lighting, legible character development. Most interesting, though, is the focus on narrative as an essential part of a woman’s desired experience of porn, which contrasts starkly with earlier feminist film theorists’ refutation of narrative film generally.

Sabo’s second criterion, progressive sexual-political commitment, is clearer: equality of pleasure at least, if not the woman taking control of the sexual encounter; equality of representation, meaning the camera is not lingering solely on the female body and genitalia or looking down at the female from the male point of view; and no coercion or violence unless it is explicitly part of a character’s fantasy.

In order to highlight examples of this preferred sort of porn, Sabo gives concise histories of three of the most pioneering filmmakers in the pornography industry: Candida Royalle in the United States, Lene Børglun in Denmark, and Anna Span in Great Britain. Sabo offers interviews with each, as well as descriptions of their most famous films, and then examines a number of different genres of women-made

porn, giving a fair assessment of the landscape. The list of resources at the back of the book is handy, collecting the web addresses of women making porn and the names of festivals that show their work.

In a world where porn often circulates in small clips that are divorced from their origins, with no indication of financing or mode of production, *After Pornified* is a helpful resource for those looking to study women-made porn. But although she offers a good starting point, Sabo does not inter-



rogate assumptions about what makes porn good or what arouses women. She avoids dealing with these issues because her book is explicitly about porn made by women, not necessarily “feminist” porn. *After Pornified* is a clearly written primer, not a definitive historical or theoretical work.

The same issues affect *Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism*, a documentary made by French pornographer Virginie Despentes. It opens with footage from *Images d'Ouverture*, a French performance piece, and from *A Gun for*

Jennifer, an independently produced feature film about feminist vigilantes. These clips set out two different poles of sex-positive feminist media — punk art pieces made in Europe, on the one hand, and more mainstream female-empowerment porn and feature films on the other.

Mutantes surveys diverse modes of sexual expression and political engagement, via film clips, news footage, and interviews with female porn producers, feminist sex workers, and feminist media scholars in the United States and France. The film begins with the origin stories of some of the most famed American porn revolutionaries: Annie Sprinkle, Candida Royalle, Norma Jean Almodovar, Scarlot Harlot, and others. Almost all of these women speak about doing sex work without censorship or victimization. Despentes later brings in scholars Linda Williams and B. Ruby Rich, who have not performed sex work but have documented it and theorized about it.

Each woman is strikingly articulate about her decision to embrace sex work, and each speaks with purpose about combating oppression through her work. A number of the interviewees consider producing porn to be a major site of resistance and revolution, while others look behind the history of prostitution itself at the values that enforce a sharp divide between acceptable, chaste womanhood and unacceptable, sexually active womanhood.

One subject to which the film devotes little attention is the intersection of sex-positive feminism and race. Sociologist Siobhan Brooks points out

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that women of color generally work in the most dangerous parts of the sex industry, such as street prostitution (rather than call-girl work), and often make less money than white sex workers. This is a significant topic that deserves further attention, but *Mutantes* allows for little to no deviation from its celebration of feminist sex workers and sex-positivism. Instructors could use this as a teaching moment for their classes, to see if any students pick up on the lack of attention to the experiences of American women of color.

The weakest part of the film is the final third, in which Despentès leaves the United States to investigate the post-porn movement in Spain and France. Punk aesthetics come to the fore in post-porn work, which contrasts with somewhat more conventional porn made by women in the U.S. However, neither the film's voiceover nor its talking heads offer enough information about this art movement to make it comprehensible to the layperson. Because American students (and their professors) will likely be less familiar with the cultural context for European punk porn, the lack of clear explanation handicaps the film.

Rather than offering an in-depth study, *Mutantes* offers glimpses of other worlds and voices that students may have encountered only in readings. Showing part of the film in class would be an excellent way to encourage students to learn more about the movement to decriminalize prostitution, the growing number of female porn entrepreneurs, how race and class intersect with sex-positive feminism, and the history of feminism in Western nations.

I Love Your Work is a survey of another magnitude altogether. In this innovative film project, director Jonathan Harris documented "a day in the

life" of nine different women, each of whom is involved in making lesbian pornography. Rather than focusing on their careers in adult film, Harris folds their performances and reflections on making porn into the texture of their daily lives. The camera accords as much attention to performer Dylan Ryan lugging a suitcase down a city street as it does to Ela Darling masturbating in a film studio surrounded by stylists, makeup artists, camera operators, grips, and producers. In fact, director Harris is so devoted to the idea of wide-ranging, cinema verité portraiture that he deliberately captured video in ten-second clips throughout his day with each woman. He did not even extend his directorial authority by highlighting the most dramatic or salacious moments; thus, a sense of randomness and verisimilitude pervades the film and increases the viewer's intimacy with the subjects, who are shown engaging in such mundane activities as watching TV in a hotel room, chatting with

In classes on feminist media or the genre of personal documentary, Harris's film could be used as an example of new possibilities of digital documentary form and distribution that are attentive to subject matter and audience behavior.

friends outside a bar, and taking a pet to the hospital. There is no one way to watch this film, however, and no reason why every visitor would feel the need to watch the more banal parts of these women's lives.

Harris ended up with about six hours of footage from nine days of shooting, and his method of delivering this footage is just as daring as his film-

ing choices. *I Love Your Work* lives on a website to which a visitor can buy a ten-dollar pass to explore for 24 hours. Once admitted into the website (which allows only ten visitors per day), a viewer can browse the footage in different ways. In "Timeline," the ten-second clips are arranged in chronological order according to which day of the week Harris followed each woman through her life. The "Tapestry" page is also chronological, but it does not identify the subject or time of day, allowing for more random discovery as the viewer dips in and out of a photo-mosaic of screenshots. In addition to the video footage, each of the participants is profiled on the "Talent" page, so a visitor can get acquainted with her in a more conventional manner, via a brief biography.

Both form and delivery method are explicitly meant to imitate the ways many users engage with internet pornography, from browsing videos by performer, to ten-second previews that entice the viewer to click to watch more, to the ability to move the video playhead forward to more interesting parts. Applying this form to a cinema verité documentary makes for a fascinating film and a humanizing experience.

Although the initial temptation might be to skip ahead to the explicitly erotic sections, it is easy to be mesmerized by the rhythm of each person's life, to enjoy the puzzle of what went on between clips, having to work out what is going on without recourse to any extradiegetic material like captions or voiceover narration.

A fascinating film, *I Love Your Work* functions better as a digital media project than as a teaching tool or research resource. In classes on feminist media or the genre of personal documentary, it could be used as an example of new possibilities of digital documentary form and distribution that are attentive to subject matter and audience behavior. It certainly fits the current mode of internet porn consumption better than a linear narrative or essay film would, but at times the ten-second-clip gimmick gets in the way, particularly during interviews. Often the subject speaks directly to the camera, in the manner of a conversation with the director/camera operator, and discusses personal feelings about porn, monogamy, or personal history, but the viewer only gets tantalizing clips of these revealing moments.

Lesbian porn star Dylan Ryan of *I Love Your Work* also features in the most indispensable of the four resources reviewed here: *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*. The editors of this volume have brought together essays by feminist porn producers and feminist porn scholars in a single volume, resulting in a conversation that speaks to the complexities of the pornography industry and the uses of pornography once it is made. The essays expand from a singular focus on the process of making feminist pornography to a nuanced view of its circulation through the world.

In the introduction to *The Feminist Porn Book*, editors Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu,

Constance Penley, and Mireille Miller-Young are upfront about their purpose, as well as about their definition of feminist porn: “Feminist porn creates

These diverse essays are written in language likely to be accessible to undergraduates in women’s studies classes or feminist film classes.

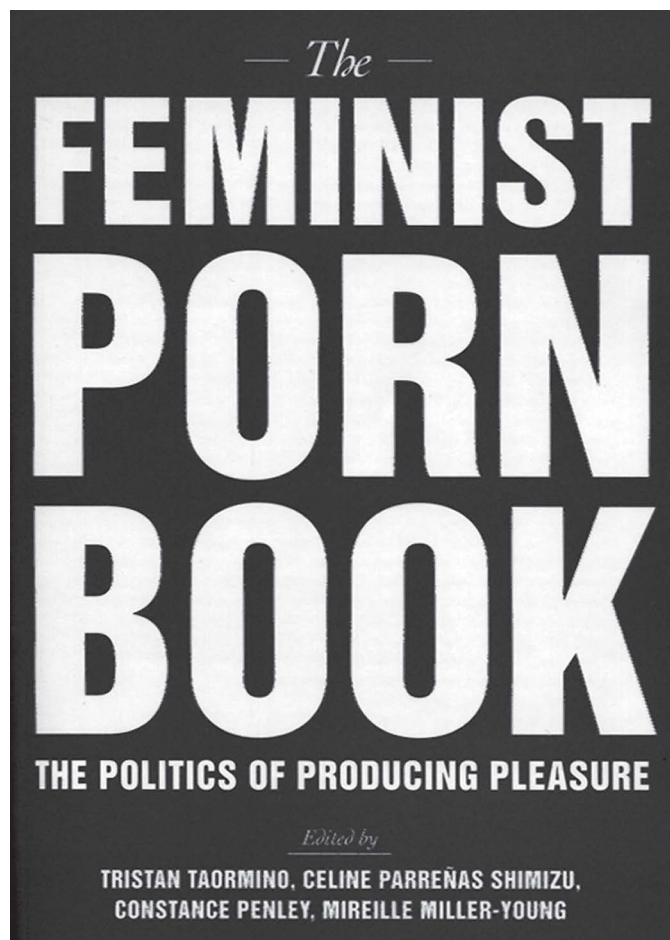
alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and discourses... Feminist porn makers emphasize the importance of their labor practices” (p. 10). In brief, feminist porn is both a filmmaking genre and a political project. This focused definition allows for contributors to interrogate assump-

tions about authorship, spectatorship, representation, race, space, and education.

The introduction and the first few essays lay out the history of feminist pornography, as well as the opposing tradition of anti-porn feminism, but the rest of the essays move beyond the basics to more specific issues. Many of them are written in the first person, but are no less incisive and useful for that. A number of them address the place of women of color, women of size, and trans* women in pornography, offering both testimonies to self-empowerment through performance in porn and sharp critiques of minority representation in current porn.

In “A Queer Feminist Pig’s Manifesta,” professor of women’s studies Jane Ward struggles with a conundrum: being aroused by mainstream porn — the politically incorrect variety that many are trying to combat. She wonders, “Can we watch sexist porn and still have feminist orgasms?” (p. 132). This honest confession of individual spectator preferences leads her to advocate for a set of self-aware viewing practices based on Buddhist principles. Other essays are attentive to pornography in specific spaces, such as the classroom and the therapist’s couch. Constance Penley reflects on her years teaching a class about pornography at the University of California, Santa Barbara, while Keiko Lane discusses using pornography in her work as a psychotherapist for numerous queer, genderqueer, and minority clients.

One particularly nice pairing demonstrates the value of an edited collection such as *The Feminist Porn*



Book: in a personal essay, Nina Hartley writes about her reasons for becoming a porn star and sex educator, making such videos as Adam and Eve's *Guide to Better Cunnilingus*, *Guide to Anal Sex*, and multi-part *Guide to Sensual Domination*. In the following essay, film scholar Kevin Heffernan traces the history of educational sex films, from independently produced exploitation films marketed as "educational" during the era of Hollywood self-censorship (1920s–1960s), to more recent incarnations distributed on home video by Adam and Eve and Vivid Video. Heffernan connects the censorship of sex education materials to broader social forces, including the medicalization of women's health and childbirth at the turn of the century and concern over the social effects of moving images following WWI. This synoptic history, and Heffernan's thoughtful descriptions of educational sex films, provides necessary context to Hartley's personal exploration and message: "[S]ex is good for you and the more you know about it, the better it's likely to be" (p. 236).

For these reasons, *The Feminist Porn Book* comes out on top as the resource with the most breadth and

depth of those reviewed here. Its diverse essays are written in language likely to be accessible to undergraduates in women's studies classes or

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feminist film classes. The authors' numerous perspectives — performer, producer, educator, scholar, activist, therapist — make a well-rounded case for the importance of sexual representation and expression to feminism, and vice versa.

If mainstream media and culture paint a monolithic portrait of pornography, they also paint a depressingly uniform portrait of women as the victims of pornography's increasing availability. Each of these books and films in its own way expands the possible ways that women can relate to sexually explicit audiovisual material. Whether personal essay or survey film, historical research or day-in-the-life documentation, these resources show how women

have been actively involved in the creation and consumption of porn. As the recent oral history of HBO's pioneering *Real Sex* series demonstrates,¹ women are not docile drones in service to a singular, patriarchal pornography — they shape their own representation on-screen in myriad ways, and they put porn to use in their own lives and careers.

Note

1. Molly Langmuir, "Masturbation, Nudists, and Street Interviews: An Oral History of HBO's *Real Sex*," *Vulture*, July 30, 2013. <http://www.vulture.com/2013/07/hbo-real-sex-oral-history-masturbation-nudists-street-interviews.html>

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Miriam Greenwald