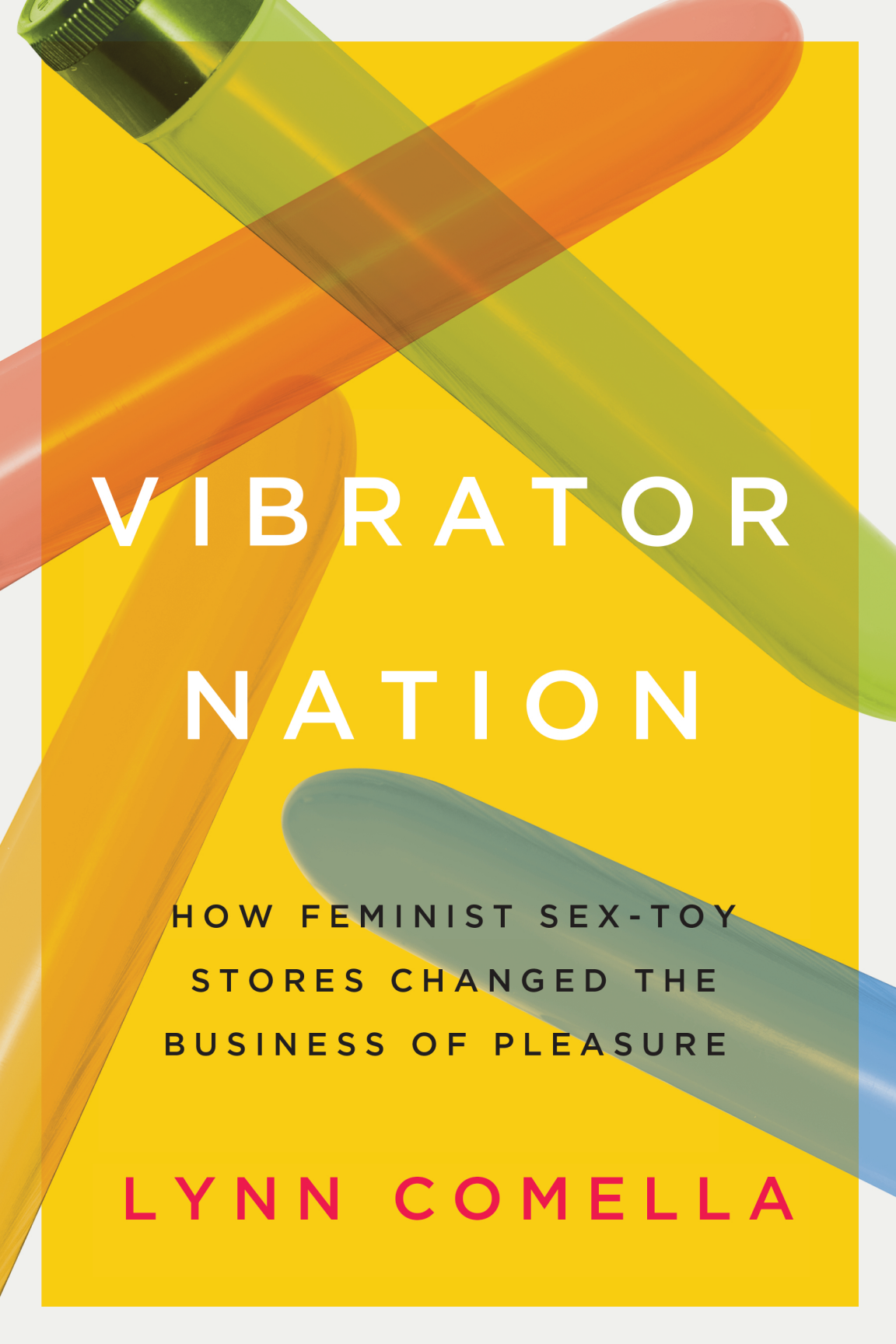




VIBRATOR NATION

HOW FEMINIST SEX-TOY
STORES CHANGED THE
BUSINESS OF PLEASURE

LYNN COMELLA

vibrator nation

HOW FEMINIST SEX-TOY
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BUSINESS OF PLEASURE

Lynn Comella

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To all the sex-positive pioneers.

You make the world a better place.

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introduction

THE MAKING OF A MARKET

Women-run sex shops are the little pockets of sanity around the country where women can go and get sex information . . . and get their toys and vibrators. This is where feminism— if there is such a thing—lives if you want to deal with sex.

BETTY DODSON

The seminar room at the Sands Expo and Convention Center in Las Vegas was filled to capacity. Onstage sat six women. They were porn producers, sex-toy retailers, product buyers, and CEOs, all of them respected industry leaders who had been asked by the organizers of the 2008 Adult Entertainment Expo—the largest adult entertainment showcase in the United States—to answer what for many had become the million-dollar question: “What do women want?”

As people in the audience listened intently and took notes, the panelists outlined what they saw as the key ingredients to marketing sex toys and pornography to women. Women want products that are made well and look good, and this includes packaging, said product buyer Alicia Relles. “Women are willing to spend a little more money for something that is beautiful and works well . . . and that will last a long time.” They also want information. “If you have a flagging retail space,” Penthouse Media executive Kelly Holland told the audience, “I’d start doing workshops.” Industry veteran Kim Airs agreed. “Having an educational component benefits retail stores because it makes your store a resource center, not just a store,” she emphasized.

The panel discussion illustrated a gravitational shift taking place in an industry long dominated by men and viewed by many as antithetical to feminism. The newly christened women’s market for sex toys and pornography had become what many analysts considered the adult industry’s hottest growth mar-

ket. “Women have dollars, believe me,” Holland told the crowd at the expo. “And they love to spend [them] on things they feel enhance their self-esteem, their intelligence, their sexual lives.” Ken Dorfman, the national sales manager for Doc Johnson, one of the largest sex-toy manufacturers in the world, used dollars and cents to make a similar point: “One guy shopping alone—average sale \$8. Two guys, \$12. But one female shopping alone—average sale \$83. Two females shopping together, \$170.”¹ In an era when profits from pornography had declined precipitously, the result of piracy and free Internet video sites, these numbers told a powerful story: the marketplace was changing and adult businesses needed to change with it.

Even the convention’s infamous parties mirrored this change. Later that evening in a suite at the Venetian Hotel and Casino, high above the Las Vegas Strip, feminist sex-toy retailer Babeland hosted a party to celebrate the release of the SaSi vibrator by Je Joue. Billed as one of the most innovative vibrators to hit the market, the SaSi was touted as a marriage of sleek design and customizable technology. While the product’s designers huddled around the prototypes they had brought with them from the United Kingdom, others, including Babeland cofounder Rachel Venning, milled around the room, sipping the evening’s specialty cocktail, the SaSitini. Transgender porn star Buck Angel lounged on the bed while, across the room, feminist author and filmmaker Tristan Taormino signed copies of *Chemistry*, her award-winning porn series.

This was not your father’s porn industry party, and it reflected the growing power of a women’s market that until fairly recently was regarded as a relatively small and somewhat inconsequential part of the larger adult industry, a specialty niche more likely to elicit a playful wink than any serious consideration. In recent decades, due in part to the popularity of television shows like *Sex and the City*—which introduced millions of viewers to the Rabbit vibrator—and the runaway success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, women have acquired newfound economic and cultural cachet as sexual entrepreneurs and consumers.²

Many adult entertainment companies, from sex-toy manufacturers to retailers, are recalibrating their business practices with an eye toward wooing female shoppers. Traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, for example, are removing their video arcades, painting their stores to make them lighter and brighter, hiring female staff, and placing a greater emphasis on stocking quality products and offering attentive customer service. They are softening the edges of their businesses and taming the often harsh and in-your-face rep-

resentations of sexuality customarily associated with the adult industry, all in the hope of appealing to women and their wallets.

A 2009 study conducted by researchers at Indiana University found that close to 50 percent of women have used vibrators and, of those, 80 percent have used them during partner sex.³ These results prompted condom-maker Trojan to cash in on the growing popularity of sex toys by developing its own line of vibrating products.⁴ References to sex toys abound in popular women's and men's lifestyle magazines, and vibrators can now be purchased at many neighborhood Walgreens. Even female celebrities have jumped on the sex-toy bandwagon. *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star Kandi Burruss teamed with sex-toy manufacturer OhMiBod to create her own line of sex toys, Bedroom Kandi, and pop star Macy Gray grabbed headlines after writing an ode to her "battery-operated boyfriend." Mainstream media, for its part, can't seem to get enough of discussing women's role in igniting a sex-toy revolution. "Are sex toys a woman's best friend?" asked one *Huffington Post* writer, while another reporter declared, "Sex toys are hot," pointing to an industry that, according to one frequently cited number, purportedly grosses upward of \$15 billion annually.⁵ Although accurate sex-toy sales figures are difficult to pinpoint—businesses keep their numbers extremely close to the vest and virtually no reliable adult industry data exist—there is little question that interest in, discussions about, and sales of sex toys have grown exponentially since the 1970s, with women leading the way.

The New Sexual Sell

It was not always the case that women's sexual satisfaction and orgasms commanded such public interest. The 1950s, the era documented in Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, were, for many women, a time of profoundly felt ambivalences. The book's 1963 publication exposed deep fissures in the cult of postwar domesticity, which had produced a generation of unhappy, bored, and listless suburban housewives who had not found fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers. Magazines, advertisements, pop psychology, and higher education had all colluded to convince women that their greatest achievements would come from waxing the floor, baking casseroles, and running the PTA. Many white, middle-class women, whose lives revolved around their children, husbands, and homes, faced a crisis of identity that left them wondering, "Is this all?"⁶

When it came to sex, these same women received extremely conflicting messages. Although the romantic fantasy of marriage and motherhood loomed large in 1950s popular culture, other competing currents were also at play. Alfred Kinsey, the Indiana University sex researcher, let the cat out of the bag in 1953 when he published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Kinsey's findings, according to historian Sara Evans, revealed that a quiet sexual revolution had been percolating for most of the twentieth century.⁷ Women masturbated and had orgasms; they engaged in heavy premarital petting and sometimes intercourse; they had extramarital affairs; and many indicated they were not exclusively heterosexual. Kinsey's discoveries exposed a "vast hidden world of sexual experience sharply at odds with publicly espoused norms."⁸

The same year that Kinsey's volume on female sexual behavior was released, the first issue of *Playboy* hit the newsstands. Author Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that *Playboy* was a "party organ of a diffuse and swelling movement" that promoted male rebellion rather than responsibility.⁹ *Playboy* encouraged young men to reject the traditional roles of husband, father, and breadwinner in favor of remaining single and indulging in the finer things in life, including the company of beautiful women. Thus, a decade before Friedan unmasked the deep discontent that many suburban housewives felt as a result of rigid gender role expectations, and years before the sexual revolution of the 1960s was in full swing, Kinsey's research and Hugh Hefner's *Playboy*—and later, Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*—challenged sexual attitudes in ways that "loosened the straitjacket of domestic ideology."¹⁰

Women were witnessing more open cultural portrayals of sexuality all around them in movies, magazines, and novels, from the 1956 *New York Times* best-seller *Peyton Place*, which told the story of unbridled lust in a fictitious New England town, to erotic lesbian pulp fiction that could be easily purchased at newsstands and corner drugstores; and yet it was also the case that women lacked socially sanctioned outlets and occasions where they could freely discuss their sexual desires, fantasies, frustrations, and pleasures.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that Friedan, in conducting interviews for *The Feminine Mystique*, encountered women who, according to her, "would often give me an explicitly sexual answer to a question that was not sexual at all."¹² That these white, middle-class women wanted to talk about their sexual adventures, many of which involved men other than their husbands, surprised Friedan and also seemed to puzzle her. Was this preoccupation with sex the cause of the "problem that has no name" or an effect? How was she to make sense of what she regarded as the "frustrated sexual hunger of American women" at

the very moment when many women had retreated to the home in pursuit of domestic bliss?¹³

While even Friedan—who would go on to help found the National Organization for Women in 1966—could not point the way forward to the types of discussions women wanted to have about their sex lives, by the time her book was published, a sea change in sexual attitudes had already begun. In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the birth control pill. By 1964, it was the most popular form of contraception in the country, becoming “an important tool in women’s efforts to achieve control over their lives.”¹⁴ The pill, so tiny and yet so groundbreaking, was not only a symbol of women’s growing sexual autonomy but also a powerful indicator of the increasing commercialization of sexual freedom. Author David Allyn has argued that the sexual revolution would never have “gotten off the ground without the free market.”¹⁵ Pharmaceutical companies invested in the pill because they saw dollar signs; the Supreme Court handed down decisions in the 1950s and 1960s that redefined obscenity in large part, according to Allyn, because the “market demand for sexual materials was so high.”¹⁶ By the end of the 1960s, there was ample evidence to suggest that American society, aided by the values of consumer culture and shifts in sexual attitudes, had become more visibly sexualized.¹⁷

Women’s forays into the sexual marketplace in the early 1970s, as both entrepreneurs and consumers, took place against this backdrop. Their increasing economic independence from men facilitated a growing sexual independence, producing what authors Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs have described as a “new consumer class for the sex industry.”¹⁸ A new kind of female sexuality was being produced through marketplace culture: “In this consumer arena female sexuality functioned differently than it had previously in mainstream society: it was unattached to reproduction, motherhood, monogamy—even heterosexuality.”¹⁹ But more than this, they argued, the sexual marketplace had a democratizing effect, helping to spread the sexual revolution to women who “would never have attended a feminist conference on sexuality or perhaps even have read one of the new sex manuals.”²⁰

Meanwhile, second-wave feminists, aided by the growing visibility of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, were dramatically reshaping cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. They challenged the patriarchal status quo that had taught women to see sex as an obligation rather than something they were entitled to pursue for the sake of their own pleasure. They wrote

essays about the politics of the female orgasm, attended sexual consciousness-raising groups, and positioned masturbation as a decidedly feminist act. In feminist rap sessions, workshops, and sex therapy groups, and on the pages of books like Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation*, the clitoris assumed newfound importance. Women were encouraged to masturbate as a way to learn about their bodies and take control of their orgasms.

Not everyone viewed the expansion of the sex industry as a sign of sexual freedom, however. In October 1967, Congress declared traffic in obscenity and pornography to be a "matter of national concern" and established an advisory Commission on Obscenity and Pornography.²¹ President Johnson appointed an eighteen-member committee to marshal evidence to determine whether the reputed smut industry was wreaking havoc on American society. The report, released in 1970, found no evidence suggesting that pornography was harmful. Instead, it claimed that "much of the 'problem' regarding materials which depict explicit sexual activity stems from the inability or reluctance of people in our society to be open and direct in dealing with sexual matters."²² The findings caused outrage. The Senate rejected them by a vote of sixty to five and Spiro T. Agnew, speaking on behalf of the Nixon administration, assured the American public that "as long as Richard Nixon is President, Main Street is not going to turn into Smut Alley."²³

Feminist opposition to pornography was also intensifying in certain corners of the women's movement. The 1972 release of *Deep Throat* put pornography front and center on the national stage and ushered in the era of porno chic.²⁴ *Deep Throat* told the story of a woman whose clitoris had mysteriously migrated to a location deep inside her throat. If she wanted to experience the peaks of sexual pleasure and orgasm, she would need to perfect the act of deep-throat fellatio. For many women, the film highlighted the failures of the sexual revolution and the inability of the culture to take women's pleasure seriously. According to media scholar Carolyn Bronstein, *Deep Throat* was feminism's aha moment, one that encapsulated the "painful truth" about what men really thought about women.²⁵ Although it would be several more years until an organized antipornography feminist movement emerged, alarm bells were already ringing.

And it wasn't just the availability of pornography that was fueling concern. In 1975 legislators in Georgia amended the state's antiobscenity clause, criminalizing the sale of "sexual devices" and creating a legal template that would serve as a model for other states, including Texas and Alabama.²⁶ Vibrators were suddenly at the center of courtroom battles regarding an individual's

right to sexual privacy versus the state's interest in regulating public morality—a concern that many critics argued unfairly targeted women. (For years, the standing joke was that it was easier to buy a handgun in Texas than a vibrator. To fly under the radar, woman-owned Forbidden Fruit in Austin adopted a highly coded language that masked the sexual uses of products, thereby insulating itself from legal repercussions.)²⁷

Into the roiling waters of these cultural debates waded the pioneering feminist entrepreneurs who are the subjects of this book. Dell Williams, who founded Eve's Garden in New York City in 1974, the first business in the United States devoted to women's sexual pleasure and health, and Joani Blank, who opened the Good Vibrations retail store in San Francisco in 1977, boldly reimagined who sex shops were for and what kinds of cultural spaces they could be at a time when no business model for women-friendly vibrator stores existed. Theirs were the first businesses to bring an unapologetically feminist standpoint to the sexual marketplace, helping to establish what Babeland co-founder Claire Cavanah has described as the "alternative sex vending movement."²⁸

Williams and Blank began their businesses at a time when places for the average woman to comfortably buy sex toys, or even talk openly about sex, were scarce. Conventional adult stores were not designed for female shoppers; reputable mail-order businesses that sold so-called marital aids were few and far between; and women walking into a department store—or any store, really—to buy a vibrating massager risked encountering a male clerk who might say, "Boy, you must really need it bad, sweetie pie."²⁹

Blank, a sex therapist with a master's degree in public health, grew Good Vibrations from a cozy hole-in-the-wall in San Francisco's Mission District with macramé on the walls into a company with a national reputation as a clearinghouse for sexual information, becoming a standard bearer for quality in an industry that had few standards. Along the way, she infused her business with a noncompetitive ethos, happily sharing the company's financial records and vendor lists with entrepreneurially minded interns who would go on to found similar stores of their own.

Today, decades later, a sex-positive diaspora of women-friendly sex shops based on the Good Vibrations retail model exists in cities across the country. Businesses such as Babeland in Seattle and New York, Early to Bed in Chicago, Smitten Kitten in Minneapolis, Self Serve in Albuquerque, Sugar in Baltimore, and Feelmore in Oakland have made quality products and accurate sex information cornerstones of their retail missions, demanding in the process that

women—as well as queer-identified and gender-nonconforming people—be taken seriously as both sexual agents and consumers.

Vibrator Nation tells the story of feminist sex-toy businesses in the United States and the women who pioneered them. It chronicles the making of a market and the growth of a movement, detailing the intertwining domains that shape the business of pleasure and the politics of business. In the chapters that follow, I draw upon extensive ethnographic and archival research, including more than eighty in-depth interviews with key retailers, manufacturers, and marketers, to discuss the history of sex-positive retail activism, including its highly gendered and class-specific nature; the relationship between identity politics and feminist entrepreneurship; and the ongoing—and perhaps irrevocable—tension between profitability and social change. This is a book about feminist invention, intervention, and contradiction, a world where sex-positive retailers double as social activists, commodities are framed as tools of liberation, and consumers are willing to pay for the promise of better living through orgasms.

Let's Talk about S-E-X

I conducted my first interview on the topic of feminist sex-toy stores in 1998 while I was still in graduate school. At the time, I was taking a seminar on fieldwork methods in cultural studies that required I conduct a small-scale ethnographic project. I was interested in the relationship between sexuality and public culture, and wanted to know more about those spaces and places where representations of women's sexuality assumed an unapologetically public presence as opposed to being relegated to the privacy of the home.³⁰ As luck would have it, a sex-toy shop geared toward women, *Intimacies*, had just opened in the small college town where I lived. I have, time and again, returned to the initial interview I conducted with *Intimacies* owner Aileen Journey because my experience at her store was so influential to the development of my thinking about the history and retail culture of feminist sex shops. It also provided me with my first eureka moment as a researcher.

Journey saw her business as a “feminist way to support women's power” and told me that she had based her store on the Good Vibrations model. Good Vibrations had even supplied her with a list of sex-toy distributors for a nominal fee of \$50 because the company's founder, Blank, wanted similar shops to open in cities across the country—and hers, Journey emphasized, was not the only business Good Vibrations had helped. According to Journey, the Good

Vibrations model included an emphasis on creating a comfortable and welcoming retail environment that did not have a lot of “porn hanging around.” It was a place where women and men of all gender identities and sexual orientations were positioned as sexual subjects, not objects, and where merchandise was openly displayed so people could pick items up and be “encouraged that this stuff is okay.” Intimacies was also a resource center, Journey explained, a place where people could ask questions and get information about sex.³¹

I spent hours at Intimacies observing the interactions between sales staff and customers in an effort to better understand what made this business different from typical adult stores ostensibly aimed at men. “This is so liberating to come into a store and talk about this stuff!” one female shopper remarked. Another noted, “I get braver every time I come in here. The first time, I looked over my shoulder, afraid that someone I know would see me. The second time, I blushed when the salesperson explained how things worked. This time, I parked illegally and strutted right in!”

As a researcher, I was captivated. I soon realized that this was a story not only about one feminist sex shop, but also about an entire network of businesses across the country that had all adopted a certain way of selling sex toys and talking about sex that blended sexual commerce and feminist politics. I knew then and there that I needed to turn this small pilot study into a much bigger research project that could more thoroughly amplify and illuminate the history of the Good Vibrations model and its travels. What were the sexual vernaculars, ways of doing things, ideologies, challenges, and paradoxes that had shaped these businesses? I wanted to know more.

The project especially resonated with me because I had become a feminist at the height of the feminist sex wars in the 1980s when heated debates about pornography, BDSM, butch-femme relationships, and politically correct sexual expression polarized many feminists. While I was an undergrad, I saw firsthand how competing values and political commitments could fracture a group of feminists when several faculty members in the women’s studies program at my university stopped speaking to each other as a result of their opposing positions on these issues. My understanding of feminism, and indeed my own sexuality, was deeply intertwined with these battles over female sexuality and its public expression, clashes that often pitted women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure against the perceived dangers of male lust and violence.³²

Around the same time, I discovered Betty Dodson’s celebratory treatise on female masturbation, which advanced the idea that masturbation was an essential stepping-stone to female liberation. Several years later, on my first

trip to San Francisco in the early 1990s, I visited Good Vibrations, a store I had learned about from reading Susie Bright's column, "Toys for Us," in *On Our Backs* magazine. It was my first visit to a sex-toy store, and while I didn't buy anything, it felt like a rite of passage, entrée into an altogether new world of sexual imaginings and possibilities. In retrospect, it is difficult to envision what my own sexual journey might have been like if I had not had access to various "sex publics"—women-owned sex-toy stores, how-to guides, literary erotica, and feminist pornography—which allowed me to imagine myself in new ways.

These discoveries felt all the more significant because I did not have easy access to sexual information growing up, nor did I come from a family in which sex was openly discussed. My parents taught me that sex was something reserved for marriage, that good girls supposedly didn't, and that one's sexual reputation was worth protecting at all costs. I learned at an early age that sex was risky: it could lead to pregnancy, disease, and a bad reputation. Perhaps not surprisingly, these lessons did not inspire a sense of teenage sexual exploration or experimentation. Instead, they produced a fair amount of confusion and angst. As I got older, publicly accessible forms of sexual culture piqued my curiosity and gave me permission to explore my sexuality in ways that were personally transformative and deeply meaningful.

I found myself on the front lines of the movement to reshape sexual culture in the early 2000s, while conducting dissertation research at feminist retailer Babeland in New York City.³³ I was trained to work on the sales floor as a staff sex educator, a role that allowed me to participate in, and gain insider knowledge about, the range of activities that constituted the daily life of the store. I talked to hundreds of customers about their sex lives, sold my fair share of dildos and vibrators, attended staff and marketing meetings, stood on my feet for hours at a time, and crossed my fingers that my cash register balanced at the end of the day. It was an ethnographer's dream, my own golden ticket into the inner sanctum of a feminist sex-toy store with a national profile (see appendix).

My position as observer and participant, ethnographic researcher and vibrator clerk, meant that I was located squarely within the talking sex phenomenon that is so central to the experience that Babeland and other feminist retailers pride themselves on offering customers. I talked with shoppers about the G-spot, strap-ons, and vibrator use; I recommended books, such as *The Good Vibrations Guide to Sex*, *The Multi-Orgasmic Man*, *The Ultimate Guide*

to *Anal Sex for Women*, and *The Survivors Guide to Sex*; I peppered my tours of Babeland's video library with facts about the history of pornography, from *Deep Throat* to *Bend Over Boyfriend*. I dispensed information about sex, dispelled common myths ("Can I become addicted to my vibrator?" The answer: No), and reassured nervous customers from all walks of life that there was nothing wrong with wanting more sexual pleasure in their lives.

I noticed that others now perceived me as a particular kind of sexual interlocutor, a quasi-expert with both academic credibility and practical know-how about sex. The subject of my research was often a topic of discussion at social events and dinner parties. "Tell them about your research," the host would say, or, "You will *never* guess what she is writing about!"

An especially memorable encounter took place one night at a party, when the host beckoned me into her bedroom. There, I found a group of thirty-something women casually piled onto her bed. One of them was holding a copy of *Bitch*, a feminist magazine dedicated to smart critiques of popular culture. As I moved closer, I realized they were looking at an ad for the Rabbit vibrator. "She thinks this is for the butt, is it?" one of them asked. "Is it a vibrator?" another inquired rather incredulously. One question led to another, and I soon found myself on the edge of the bed talking with a group of strangers about vibrators and the history of women-run sex shops.

For me, the field was potentially everywhere: the sex shop floor, adult industry trade shows, social gatherings and dinner parties, magazines and blogs, panels and invited speaking engagements, and, over time, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. There were no clear boundaries demarcating which occasions might yield useful data, or when I might encounter people willing—and indeed eager—to talk about sex. Simply wearing a Babeland T-shirt in public became a magnet for strangers who wanted to talk about their experience shopping for sex toys at Babeland or a similar store.

These seemingly random conversations and serendipitous encounters were actually data points, snippets of talk that revealed something meaningful about Babeland's brand recognition and reach; they also spoke to the ways in which the talking sex part of its mission extended far beyond the limits of its retail stores and website. And finally, these moments also said something about me, and the degree to which I had internalized the idea that sexuality should be talked about and studied as we would any other social phenomenon.

The Cultural Production of Sexuality

Vibrator Nation can be situated within the larger research tradition of studies of cultural production, an approach that has historically “sought to make concrete the universe in which designated ‘cultural producers’ (TV writers, broadcast journalists, filmmakers, etc.) do what they do.”³⁴ Scholars have analyzed the making of television shows, consumer markets, magazines, and organizations, revealing the broader institutional contexts, practices, and processes that give rise to specific cultural texts and meanings.³⁵ In the field of sexuality studies, there is a growing body of scholarship that draws on these traditions to examine how sexual commerce and culture—the pornography industry, legal brothels, strip clubs, and BDSM clubs—are produced and organized.³⁶

The focus of this book is brick-and-mortar feminist sex-toy stores, those physical spaces where customers can interact directly with sexual products and the people who sell them.³⁷ Like other forms of popular culture, retail stores are made; they are produced by social actors—store owners, managers, sales staff, and marketers—who cultivate specific kinds of shopping environments with particular audiences in mind.³⁸ Through the careful design of their retail spaces, the types of inventory they carry, the strategic display of merchandise, and their direct appeals to consumers on the basis of gender, race, social class, and cultural taste, feminist sex-toy retailers actively cultivate ideas about sexual identity and the role that consumption plays in people’s lives. They also produce what French philosopher Michel Foucault has described as a “proliferation of discourses concerned with sex”—specific messages about sexual empowerment, education, and well-being—and a corresponding set of retail practices aimed at transforming the sexual self.³⁹ As one staff sex educator at Babeland explained, “We don’t just sell products. We sell information; we sell education; we sell our mission [which is] making the world a safer place for happy, healthy, sexual beings.”⁴⁰ In other words, feminist sex-toy stores produce a particular understanding of what it means to be a happy, healthy, and sexually empowered individual, and offer a consumer-oriented agenda for how this might be achieved.

At the center of this retail universe is the discourse—and, one might argue, sexual ethic—of sex positivity. Sex positivity is a way of conceptualizing and talking about sexuality that seeks to intervene in a culture overwhelmingly shaped by the belief that sex is a dangerous, destructive, and negative force.⁴¹ Longtime Good Vibrations staff sexologist Carol Queen explains that sex positivity is both a social critique and a “cultural philosophy that under-

stands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one's life. . . . It allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires, and relationship structures and individual choices based on consent."⁴² This includes the idea that the more encouragement and support people have around their sexuality, the better; that everyone deserves access to accurate information about sex; and that people should not be embarrassed or ashamed for wanting more sexual pleasure in their lives. Sex positivity functions as an ideological matrix that informs virtually every aspect of the Good Vibrations retail model, from marketing and advertising to product selection and customer service.

Today, feminist sex-toy stores sit at the epicenter of a growing network of sex-positive cultural production and consumption, serving as sites of distribution for sex toys, books, and other products aimed at enhancing people's sexual lives and relationships. Good Vibrations has also served as a launching pad for a number of sex-positive writers, educators, and pornographers who have impacted the broader culture in significant ways. Author Susie Bright was working at Good Vibrations in the 1980s when she helped found *On Our Backs*, a magazine for the "adventurous lesbian"; Marilyn Bishara started Vixen Creations, a silicone dildo manufacturing company, in 1992 when she was plugging away as a computer programmer at Good Vibrations; Jackie Strano and Shar Rednour, the creative forces behind lesbian porn company SIR Video, conceived the *Bend Over Boyfriend* series of instructional sex videos while working on the Good Vibrations sales floor in the late 1990s; and filmmaker Shine Louise Houston, the founder of Pink and White Productions, an award-winning porn company known for featuring queer people of color, credits Good Vibrations for teaching her about sex positivity. And the list goes on.

This book brings the history of feminist sex-toy stores to life. In the chapters ahead, I detail how, since the early 1970s, sex-positive feminist retailers in the United States have used consumer culture as an instrument for sexual consciousness-raising and social change by imbuing sex toys and sex-toy stores with new kinds of cultural and political possibilities. A number of cultural critics have argued that radical politics are at odds with or hostile to consumer capitalism.⁴³ Others suggest that the sex industry is the epitome of crass commercialism and gendered exploitation, a male-dominated sphere that is inherently inhospitable to women.⁴⁴ My research challenges these perspectives. I argue that feminist sex-toy stores have created a viable counterpublic sphere for sex-positive entrepreneurship and retail activism, one where the idea that the personal is political is deployed in the service of a progressive—and potentially transformative—sexual politics. And yet, as readers will see,

there is nothing self-evident about how discourses of sexual education, empowerment, feminism, and consumer capitalism mediate and rearticulate each other within these decidedly commercial spaces. The tension between defining and advancing a feminist mission in these stores and ensuring their financial success has led to sharp debates among owners and staff—at times threatening the stores' very survival. As store owners have attempted to define what it means to be a successful feminist business in the context of capitalism, they have come up against a number of related questions. What do they describe as their brand of feminism and who is included? How do they legitimize their businesses in a culture where sex is seen as dirty without resorting to stereotypes about race, class, and gender? What possibilities, moreover, do commercialized versions of feminist politics enable and what might they foreclose?

Cultural theorist Michael Warner argues that sexual autonomy requires “more than freedom of choice, tolerance and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their sexual desires until they find them.”⁴⁵ Warner suggests that although people do not go shopping for sexual identities, they nonetheless have a stake in a culture that enables sexual variance and freely circulates knowledge about it. Without these things people have no other way of discovering what they might or might not want when it comes to sex.

My research on the history of feminist sex-toy stores in the United States and the growth of the women's market for sex toys and pornography suggests that many people do in fact go shopping for sexual identities and information, and the range of practices and possibilities that such knowledge enables. This book is my attempt to detail how feminist entrepreneurs are redefining the sexual marketplace and redrawing the boundaries between sexual commerce and politics—one conversation, one vibrator, and one orgasm at a time.

NOTES

introduction

1. As quoted in “B2B Means Business,” in *The AVN Adult Entertainment Expo Show Guide*, January 2008, 50. Copy on file with author.

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3. Debby Herbenick, Michael Reece, Stephanie A. Sanders, Brian Dodge, Annahita Ghassemi, and J. Dennis Fortenberry, “Prevalence and Characteristics of Vibrator Use by Women in the United States: Results from a Nationally Representative Study,” *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 6 (2009): 1857–1866.

4. Hilary Howard, “Vibrators Carry the Conversation,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/fashion/21VIBRATORS.html?_r=0.

5. Emma Gray, “Vibrator Sales Up — Are Sex Toys a Woman’s Best Friend?” *Huffington Post*, May 8, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/08/vibrator-sales-sex-toys-women_n_1501352.html. Sherri Shaulis, senior editor of pleasure products at *Adult Video News*, noted in a personal correspondence that it is necessary to contextualize this \$15 billion figure. This number reflects sales globally, not nationally, and includes everything from \$10 bullet vibrators to \$7,000 sex dolls. It also includes sexual lubricants, sex furniture, and so on. And while it is very likely that this often-quoted figure is exaggerated, Shaulis acknowledges that “no real [sales] data exist.” For articles citing this figure, see David Rosen, “What the \$15 Billion Sex Toy Industry Tells Us about Sexuality Today,” *Alternet*, March 7, 2013, <http://www.alternet.org/sex-amp-relationships/what-15-billion-sex-toy-industry-tells-us-about-sexuality-today>; Janet Burns, “How the ‘Niche’ Sex Toy Market Grew into an Unstoppable \$15B Industry,” *Forbes*, July 16, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/janetwburns/2016/07/15/adult-expo-founders-talk-15b-sex-toy-industry-after-20-years-in-the-fray/#5d2b394f38a1>.

6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2001 [1963]).
7. Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 12.
8. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 286.
9. Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1983), 42.
10. Evans, *Personal Politics*, 11.
11. According to historian Lillian Faderman, lesbian pulp novels "helped spread the word about lesbian lifestyles to women who may have been too sheltered otherwise to know that such things existed." See Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 147.
12. Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 258.
13. Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 261.
14. Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 6.
15. David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 243.
16. Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, 243.
17. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 327.
18. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, *Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986), 105.
19. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, *Re-making Love*, 105.
20. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, *Re-making Love*, 109.
21. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 1.
22. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *Report*, 53.
23. "Is Smut Good for You?" *Time*, October 12, 1970.
24. Gerard Damiano, dir., *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano Film Productions, 1972).
25. Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-pornography Movement, 1976–1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 82.
26. Following Georgia's lead, Texas amended its antiobscenity laws in 1979 and was soon joined by Colorado (1981), Mississippi (1983), Louisiana (1985), Kansas (1986), Alabama (1998), and Virginia (2000). Most of the statutes were challenged, and while some were found to be unconstitutional by state courts, others were upheld. In 2008, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the Texas ban, making Alabama the only state where the sale of vibrators and other "obscene devices" remains illegal. For a discussion of these bans, see Tristan Taormino, "Dallas Dildo Defiance," in *Tristan Taormino's True Lust: Adventures in Sex, Porn and Perversion* (San Francisco: Cleis, 2002), 13–15; Danielle J. Lindemann, "Pathology Full Circle: A History of Anti-vibrator Legislation in the United States," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 15, no. 1 (2006):

326–346; Alana Chazan, “Good Vibrations: Liberating Sexuality from the Commercial Regulation of Sexual Devices,” *Texas Journal of Women and the Law* 18, no. 2 (2009): 263–305; Karthik Subramanian, “It’s a Dildo in 49 States, but It’s a Dildon’t in Alabama: Alabama’s Anti-obscenity Enforcement Act and the Assault on Civil Liberty and Personal Freedom,” *Alabama Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Law Review* 1, no. 111 (2011): 111–139.

27. Lynn Raridon, interview with author, March 26, 2002.

28. Claire Cavanah, interview with author, August 30, 2001.

29. Joani Blank, “Closing Keynote Plenary” (Catalyst Con West, Burbank, California, September 13, 2015).

30. For discussions regarding private versus public representations of sexuality, see Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Dangerous Bedfellows, *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism* (Boston, MA: South End, 1996).

31. Aileen Journey, interview with author, October 25, 1998.

32. For discussion of these debates, see Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*; Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Carole Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

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34. Lisa Henderson, “Sexuality, Cultural Production, and Foucault” (paper presented at Sexuality after Foucault, Manchester University, Manchester, U.K., November 2003).

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Frank, *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

37. Although online retailing and home sex-toy parties are important revenue streams for many feminist sex-toy companies, these retail channels have their own logic and produce consumer experiences that are different from the ones I examine in this book. Home sex-toy parties, which are based on a model of direct selling popularized by companies such as Tupperware, occur in the privacy of individuals' homes and typically rely on preexisting networks of friends and acquaintances; and for many people, shopping for sex toys online is as much about anonymity as it is convenience.

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40. Jacq Jones, interview with author, April 12, 2002.

41. For a discussion of sex negativity and its effects, see Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michelle A. Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.

42. Carol Queen and Lynn Comella, "The Necessary Revolution: Sex-Positive Feminism in the Post-Barnard Era," *Communication Review* 11, no. 3 (2008): 278.

43. See Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016); Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2000).

44. See Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2010); Julia Long, *Anti-porn: The Resurgence of Anti-pornography Feminism* (London: Zed, 2012); Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2007).

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1. Betty Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars: A Sexual Memoir* (New York: Betty Dodson, 2010), 177.