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**“Great Sex” = Good Feminism**

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**Abstract**

The visibility of sexual information and the popularity of sex advice texts have grown exponentially in recent years, aiding in the ease and accessibility of acquiring sexual knowledge and instruction, as well as resulting in a growing emphasis on the importance of sexual activity within heterosexual relationships. Not coincidentally, in recent years the figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject – ‘the new free sexual woman’ – has evolved as the poster girl for the empowered ‘(post)feminist’. Within mainstream imagery, sexual pleasure is now embraced as an unproblematic form of female self-empowerment and the pleasures of all things ‘feminine’ now sits comfortably alongside notions of autonomy, sexual liberty and resistance – “great sex” = good feminism. This paper will address these important shifts within contemporary popular thought. In doing so, this paper aims to explore the extent to which these significant shifts, as they are articulated within the discourse of sex advice literature, work toward reaffirming and encouraging the reproduction of gendered notions of heterosexuality and sexual practice, most specifically the privileged status of male heterosexual sexuality within heterosexual relationships.

There is little doubt that within contemporary Western culture we live within a social environment that has become increasingly saturated with sexual imagery. 'Sex' is everywhere. Within the hypersexualized climate of contemporary Western culture, where sexual talk and imagery proliferates, it would appear that we live within a sexually freer more diverse culture. The emergence, in recent decades, of new social and sexual movements (feminism, gay and lesbian, and other radical sexual movements) has raised critical questions in terms of sexual practices, lifestyles and identity and has, to a certain extent, fed into mainstream Western culture bringing about a reorientation in thinking. However, despite how endlessly variable human sexuality is in its potential, the meanings given to sex and sexuality, within Western culture, are limited and not open to fluid negotiation. Sexuality, as it is conceptualized within contemporary Western culture, contains specific assumptions, norms and values, and is channelled into very specific representations, expressions and practices (Hamblin 1983; Jackson 1984; Richardson 1996a; Rubin 1984; Tiefer 2004). As Kathy Miriam (2007, 211) states, 'despite the visibility – and to some extent cultural legitimacy – of diverse sexual identities', within contemporary popular thought the iconic image of a man and woman engaged in coitus continues to dominate the realm of human sexuality – it is still essentially what sex 'is' (Tiefer 2004).

Furthermore, heterosexual sexual practice is typically conceptualized in terms of attraction to difference - gender is the marker of that difference (Hollway 1996; Jeffreys 1996; Richardson 1996). Indeed, heterosexuality depends for its meaning on gender divisions (Jeffreys 1996; Richardson 1996). Gender difference is constituted through powerful normative conceptualizations of what it means to be masculine or feminine, (Holland et al. 1996). Further, a number of theorists have spoken at length about the eroticization of sexual difference and the conceptualization of heterosexuality in terms of masculine/dominance and feminine/submissiveness (Segal 1983; Jeffreys 1996; Richardson, 1996; Duncombe and Marsden 1996). This has the added weight of the construction of sexuality as intrinsically genital, whereby male desire is associated with erections, and 'active sex' is conceptualized in terms of penetration (Hawkes and Scott 2005, 10). Most importantly within this context, gender is hierarchically organised with masculinity and male sexuality as the unspoken but assumed norm (Hamblin 1983; Weeks 1986; Richardson 1996; Jeffreys, 1996; Segal 1999 Dunne 2003; Jackson 2003; Tiefer, 2004): a norm which is founded on male sexual needs, rights and performance (Pateman 1988; Miriam 2007). According to Catharine Mackinnon (1989, 129) heterosexual meaning is made specifically and primarily in the 'interests of male sexuality'. In agreement with this, Kathy Miriam has argued that:

Heterosexuality – considered as a hegemony – is a process through which men's interests gain legitimacy in a patriarchal social order, or, in other words, a process through which masculinist sexuality constitutes itself as men's *right* to have sexual access to women (2007, 215).

The sexually saturated climate in which we currently live then may not be so much a celebration of sexual diversity and fluidity, but a continuing celebration of heterosexual sexuality, but most specifically – masculine heterosexual sexuality.

The aim of my current research project is to explore the extent to which these pervasive beliefs and assumptions surrounding heterosexual sexual practice remain discursively placed within contemporary popular mainstream representations, especially within the key site of sex advice discourse. This paper will address a number of important shifts within contemporary popular thought, as they are articulated within printed sex advice literature. Most specifically: the increasing importance of sexual activity within heterosexual relationships and the alignment of sexual liberalism with women's sexual agency, empowerment and liberation. In doing so, I aim to show how each of these significant shifts,

as they are articulated within the discourse of sex advice literature, work together toward reaffirming and encouraging the reproduction and reaffirmation of gendered notions of heterosexuality and heterosexual sexual practice, most specifically the privileging of male heterosexual sexuality within the practices of heterosexual sexuality and relationships.

I am well aware that this particular position has become increasingly ‘unfashionable’ within academic discourse in recent years. The influence of postmodern theory in regards to analyses surrounding sexuality and gender has changed the face of feminist theorizing. To a significant degree there appears to be an assumption within academic circles that an analysis of ‘sexuality’ or ‘gender’ that does not draw extensively, if not exclusively from postmodern theories is intellectually inferior, vulgar, or worse still – redundant. However, I believe the postmodern concern with undermining the dualistic and categorical nature of gender, while theoretically legitimate, has effectively obscured the primary and pivotal component of gender analysis, feminist theory and activism – that is the subordination of women by men and effectively pulls the rug out from under any critical analysis of the gendered nature of popular representations and imagery and the material reality of the continuing pervasiveness of ‘male sex right’ within Western culture. As Kathy Miriam (2007, 211) succinctly states, and with which I agree:

Normative heterosexuality is crucial for the maintenance of female subordination... we cannot fully understand heterosexist bigotry, or the heterosexual norm, without (re) theorising the connection between heteronormativity and male supremacy.

As mentioned previously, the accessibility of sexual information and the popularity of sex advice texts have grown exponentially in recent years. Women’s and Men’s magazines, instructional videos and DVDs’, and the growing proliferation of online resources, have aided in the ease and accessibility of acquiring sexual knowledge and instruction. Heterosexual couples now have a plethora of informative sources from which to draw instructions and suggestions on ways to increase their sexual pleasure and improve their sexual relationships. What is strikingly apparent within the context of this endless barrage of instructions, suggestions and advice is the sheer magnitude of importance that sexuality appears to play in the perceived success of heterosexual relationships. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (1997, 563) have stated that sexuality is ‘singled out as a special area of life; to be bad at sex is worse than being bad at anything else, it strikes fundamentally at our identities’. Furthermore ‘good sex is also assumed to indicate sexual and therefore emotional compatibility – a sign of true love’ (Jackson and Scott 1997, 562).

Within this context, it is hard to imagine a time when ‘good sex’ was not regarded as a pivotal component of a successful relationship. Yet prior to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a couple’s sexual relationship did not receive the attention or accompanying expectations that today we seem to take for granted. A number of theorists have traced the development and changing face of sex advice literature within Western culture, beginning around the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Connell and Hunt 2006; McLaren 1999; Neuhaus 2000; Tunariu and Reavey 2003). These early attempts at sexual instruction, referred to as ‘marriage manuals’ (Connell and Hunt 2006) largely advocated restraint and moderation in marital sexual encounters (Neuhaus 2000), for both men and women. Placed within the emerging sexual science of the period, these texts were preoccupied largely with the reproductive aspects of sexuality, and sexual intercourse was regarded as an ‘unfortunate necessity’ (Neuhaus 2000, 451).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a marked shift, and the importance of sexuality within a couple’s relationship became a focal point (Neuhaus 2000; Scott, 2005; Connell and Hunt 2006). Marital sex was now regarded as an essential component of a successful relationship and seen as a means of consolidating and stabilizing the marital unit (McLaren 1999; Connell and Hunt 2006). With this emphasis - referred to as ‘the eroticisation of marriage’ or ‘the sexualisation of love’ (Scott, 2005 174) - there was an increasing focus on sexual technique,

in which sexuality was represented as an 'art' or 'skill' that required practice (Hawkes and Scott 2005). This shift certainly emphasized the pleasures of sexuality and encouraged sexual exploration, but only within the traditional guidelines of what was considered 'appropriate' sexual practice – namely heterosexual sexual activity which culminated in coitus. Further, while earlier texts had instructed males to exercise self control in relation to the frequency of intercourse and ejaculation (Jackson and Scott 2004), they were now instructed to continue doing so, but in the interest of sexual competency, to instruct and please their female partner: 'the husband became both seducer and mentor, who must learn the techniques of arousing a women's desires in order to teach her how to express them' (Jackson and Scott 2004, 560). This shift encouraged a greater emphasis on women's sexual pleasure. However, the importance placed on male sexuality, performance and skill was largely encouraged in the interest of eliciting a more favourable response from the female partner. Essentially, the motive here was to allow for greater access to the woman's body and to her sexuality, through encouraging and emphasizing how essential the frequency and regularity of intercourse was in terms of strengthening the marital relationship. While sexual reciprocity appeared to be of utmost importance within these texts, a woman's role was seen as one of encouragement. Essentially, women were instructed to support male sexuality.

The emphasis on the mastering of sexual technique, within the literature of sex advice, increased tenfold during the 1960s and 1970s, personified by representations and imagery with increasing sexual variety, positions and locations (Altman 1984; Connell and Hunt, 2006). Throughout this period, what is generally considered to be 'the sexual revolution', the 'marriage manual' took the form of 'the sex manual' (Altman 1984; Connell and Hunt 2006). Many feminists during the late 1960s and early 1970s were highly critical of the sexual freedom and liberatory promise of the sexual revolution (Gerhard 1996, 37). Essentially the sexual liberalism that was offered during this period 'consistently assumed that women's sexual freedom was identical to men's sexual freedom' (Gerhard 1996, 37), thus women were encouraged to 'approach sex like men do' (Machin and Thornborrow 2006, 176). Therefore, feminists fiercely argued that the affirmation of sexuality during this period was nothing more than a continuing 'celebration of masculine sexuality' (Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown 1993, 184) and as such 'ignored the realities of sexism and sexual violence in women's lives' (Gerhard 1996, 37). Despite this, and reflecting the popular assumption of the time that women were now 'full sexual agents able and willing to act on their own desires responsibly' (Gerhard 1996, 110), sex advice literature encouraged, if not demanded, that women actively participate within the sexual relationship. It was no longer adequate to merely encourage and support one's partner; women were now required to become experts themselves. As Sheila Jeffreys has stated:

The sexual revolution completed the sexualisation of women. Both married and unmarried women were expected to become experts in sexually servicing men, and to get over their own tastes and interests in order to become efficient at this task (1993, 110).

In terms of contemporary sex advice discourse very little has changed. It has been argued by Connell and Hunt (2006, 37) that, from the 1960s and early 1970s to the present day, sex advice discourse has tended to represent heterosexual sexuality in a way that supports and encourages 'an increasingly hedonistic quest for mutual sexual pleasure'. Contemporary commentary suggests that the increasing visibility of sexual discourse in recent times has, in turn, resulted in extraordinarily heightened expectations, in terms of evermore skilled and varied sexual performances. Recent publications such as: *Position Sex: 50 Wild Sex Positions You Probably Haven't Tried* (Rawlins 2007); *The Wild Guide to Sex and Loving* (Kelly 2002); *The Great Lover Playbook: 365 Sexual Tips and Techniques to Keep the Fires Burning All Year Long* (Paget 2005); and *The Multi Orgasmic Couple: Sexual Secrets Every*

*Couple Should Know* (Chia 2002), most certainly illustrate the increasing emphasis placed on sexual experimentation, skill and variety. As Tracey Cox (1998, viii) stresses throughout her international bestseller *Hot Sex: How To Do it*, the goal is to 'take the monotony out of monogamy'.

Importantly, this focus on the acquisition of sexual skill and adequate performance has continued alongside the prevailing emphasis on the importance of sexual activity within relationships. Sexual variety and experimentation is often encouraged in the interest of increasing intimacy. In *XXX Sex...Tonight!: Triple XXX Sex Secrets To Keep Him Wanting More*, Anne Hooper (2006, 7) proposes that 'triple xxx sex is an exciting adventure into the unknown, which can connect you to your partner on a deep emotional level'. Referred to as the 'sex as a lifestyle' discourse (Hawkes 1996), there is now a culturally dominant expectation that individuals not only have a right, but moreover an obligation to give and receive maximum satisfaction in their sexual relationship (Tunariu and Reavey 2003) – 'sexual satisfaction, we believe, is our due' (Perel 2007, 8). Importantly this emphasis continues to be regarded as pivotal, not only in terms of giving and receiving sexual pleasure, but as a measure of commitment to the relationship itself. In the New York Times bestseller, *How To Satisfy A Man Every Time...and have him beg for more!* Naura Hayde reiterates this point numerous times throughout her book:

Most women believe that love conquers all. This is what most churches and philosophies teach, and love *is* the most important emotion of all. But what most churches and philosophies leave out is that romantic marital love is an active state, not a passive one, and must be expressed through its *deepest* expression, *sexual* love (1999, 7).

'Sexual' love then, is not solely about sexual pleasure, but is seen as the 'deepest' expression of romantic love, and is regarded as a barometer for the intensity of feeling between a couple. Wanting a 'good' sex life is tantamount to wanting a 'good' relationship and, if as current trends show, 'good' sex means variety and experimentation, it is not difficult to understand why sexual skill and variety is perceived as pivotally important within a couple's sexual relationship. Naura Hayde (1999, 118) also adheres to this philosophy stressing that 'there's *nothing* deadlier to a marriage than boring sex'. Thus, a mundane or monotonous sex life is to be avoided at all cost and uninhibited sex, variety and sexual experimentation are encouraged as a prescription for flagging sexual routines (Connell and Hunt 2006; Tunariu and Reavey 2003). Within this climate, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2004, 243) are correct in their suggestion that 'even to ask the question 'what's so special about sex?' or to suggest that everyday sex might be acceptable is to risk being seen as a sad person deprived of 'good' sex'.

The assumption that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in releasing both men and women from the confines of 'sexual repression' has prevailed within the popular imagination. As evidenced by the overriding belief in the importance of sexuality within the heterosexual relationship which has continued to intensify, together with the prevailing assumption of the liberatory promise of sexual liberalism and the increasing emphasis on sexual variety and experimentation which was offered up as liberation during this period. Furthermore, despite the efforts of feminist theorists throughout the intervening years, the conflation of 'women's liberation' with 'sexual liberation' has prevailed, becoming almost a part of folk wisdom within contemporary popular thought. In fact, as I intend to show, in recent years the alignment of sexual liberalism with women's sexual agency has intensified, marking a significant turn within the popular imagination. I aim to show that with this turn, traditionally gendered assumptions and beliefs surrounding heterosexuality have been rendered even more, not less hegemonic within our culture. Most specifically that the privileging of masculine sexuality, which played such a pivotal role in the liberalism of the

'sexual revolution', remains a pervasive force within the popular consciousness, posing a serious threat to the social and sexual wellbeing of contemporary Western women.

In recent decades there has been an abundance of sex advice literature dealing exclusively with women's sexual pleasure. Early publications such as Nancy Friday's (1973) *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies* and *Becoming Orgasmic: A Sexual and Personal Growth Program for Women* (Heiman and LoPiccolo 1988) certainly assisted in bringing women's sexuality to the foreground of mainstream public consciousness. This focus on women's sexuality and sexual pleasure remains popular to the present day. Publications such as, *The Sex You Want: A Lovers' guide to Women's Sexual Pleasure* (Douglass and Douglass 2003); *Sex Matters for Women: A Complete Guide to Taking Care of Your Sexual Self* (Foley, Kope and Sugrue 2002) and *Self-Sexual healing: Finding Pleasure Within* (Baker 2003) continue to emphasize the importance of women's sexual pleasure and autonomy. There is most certainly an openness and frankness surrounding female sexuality that would not have been conceived of as early as 30 years ago, and I am in no way suggesting that this increasing focus on female sexuality within the public domain has not benefitted women to an enormous degree. What I am suggesting is that, to a significant degree, the sexual liberalism offered women within the popular mainstream, as a road to sexual freedom and personal empowerment, is premised on anything but female liberation.

Within contemporary mainstream Western culture, representations and imagery of women's sexual freedom sells. The figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject, 'the new free sexual woman', has evolved as the poster girl for the empowered '(post) feminist' – 'the sexual revolution, in short, happened and women benefitted from it – end of story' (Gerhard 1996, 37). As it is conceived and articulated within mainstream imagery, sexual pleasure is now embraced as an unproblematic form of female self empowerment. Exaggerated femininity and the celebration of a highly stylised and sexualized female form, which during the second wave of feminism would have been defined (and denounced) as a primary and fundamental expression of male oppression is now positioned as 'central to a politics of agency, confidence and resistance' (Munford 2004, 148). Superficially, at least, it may appear that mainstream women's engagement with an increasingly consumerized and hypersexualized culture suggests that women now play a far more active and participatory role in the way in which women's sexuality is conceived and articulated within Western culture. To a certain extent, this is certainly the case. Yet there are, I believe, a number of significant problems with accepting this fundamental assumption wholesale.

The most significant, and I believe dangerous, aspect of this construct of 'the new free sexual woman' is its alignment with what is popularly considered as the primary aims and principles of the second wave of feminism. This powerful alignment has developed, not coincidentally, alongside a shift within contemporary media culture in the way in which feminism is constructed and represented. Within the popular media and culture sexism is now 'articulated in an ironic and knowing register in which feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (Gill 2007, 271). Feminist concerns are assumed as common-sense. Yet, there is no doubt that the liberatory goals and aspirations surrounding much of the second wave of feminism, in terms of social change if not revolution, has not infiltrated the popular consciousness to the degree, or in quite the way, that second wave feminists would have hoped (Church Gibson, 2004). As Imogen Tyler (2007, 186) states:

If the radical feminism of the 1970s began the task of laying bare the ways in which society was organised to perpetuate masculine and capitalist interest, attempts to utilize this newly acquired knowledge towards its larger (utopian) goal of creating a society to serve all women's interests have been derailed.

While the general aims and principles of the second wave of feminism (at least those that made it into the popular consciousness) remain almost as a taken-for-granted self evident

assumption, there seems to be a popular belief, both within mainstream media and the popular imagination, that the second wave of feminism in its more militant revolutionary form went ‘too far’. The most obvious manifestation of this is the way in which ‘the feminist’ herself has often been characterised (or demonized) within the popular media – a characterisation that unfortunately continues to reside within the popular consciousness. Pamela Church Gibson states:

The grotesque parody of a ‘feminist’ which was proffered up for popular consumption in the early seventies is still with us – the dungaree-wearing, bra-burning, man-hating, crop-haired, strident woman. This potent myth still lurks in the popular psyche, responsible for those endless, infuriating remarks that begin ‘I’m not a feminist but...’ (2004, 138).

Further, as suggested by Imogen Tyler, and perhaps even more poignant for contemporary women: ‘the figuration of the feminist as selfish, cold, frigid, irrationally angry, confused, and perhaps more than anything a singular, lonely and unhappy figure’ (2007, 185).

For contemporary Western women ‘the feminist’, as she is articulated and conceived within the popular imagination, is rejected outright. Within contemporary popular culture ‘feminism is good - it’s just the women’s movement that is bad’ (Pollitt 1996, 8), as the spectre of ‘the feminist’ continues to haunt contemporary Western women. This ambivalence has, I believe, led to a vacancy within the consciousness of contemporary Western women. Women most certainly continue to expect and demand sexual freedom, autonomy and self empowerment, yet alienated as they are from the women’s movement they no longer have a socially or politically legitimate resource or language from which to address or tackle these issues. The question: ‘where do we go to from here?’ has sadly been answered with the development of a new and improved form of female empowerment. – popular feminism.

The true appeal of this new mediated form of feminism is that it appears to embrace all the tenets and fundamental principles of the second wave of feminism, while avoiding the less than attractive elements that continue to be associated with feminism itself. This new strain of female liberation announces itself as being about personal autonomy, strength and individualism. In keeping with the reservations many women appear to have in relation to the women’s movement, this popular form of women’s empowerment does not define itself as feminism, as such. It does, however, appropriate and make use of highly effective feminist ‘sound bites’, while simultaneously offering itself as ‘an updated replacement for – and displacement of – second wave feminism’ (Munford 2004, 143).

As it is articulated within the popular media, popular feminism ‘seeks power for individual women to use for themselves and advocates women meeting their own needs in responsible ways’, suggesting that ‘women should recognize their potential for power and seize control in public life’ (Sandell 1996, 27). What is evident here is that the strategies and objectives involved in achieving this ‘seizing of control’ are somewhat evasive; essentially that is because there are no strategies or objectives. Popular feminism is about celebrating womanhood, but what that means appears to be at the discretion of each individual woman. Anything goes within this celebratory form of feminism. It is all about difference, diversity and, most importantly, personal choice. This emphasis on personal choice is strikingly apparent within the increasing acceptance of, and emphasis on, the pleasures of feminine bodily practices. Sandra Coney (1996, 276) has stated:

Anything goes; face lifts, teeth capping, hormone replacement therapy, collagen implants, diathermy, liposuction. Get your spare tyres shifted to your tits. Women used to feel pressured to do such things to compete. Not any more... It’s all just good clean post-feminist fun.

Feminine bodily practices, far from being regarded as a coercive requirement, have become recoded as the road to empowerment, as ‘looking sexy’ and ‘feeling sexy’ has become

intimately linked, together with the notion of female sexual freedom and power. Yet importantly these practices also increase women's sexual desirability, as they conveniently adhere to the requirements of male heterosexual desire. Furthermore, while promoting the importance of recognizing difference, diversity and personal choice, this new form of female empowerment relies predominantly on the liberalist assumption that sexual exploration, experimentation and the pursuit of sexual pleasure is compatible with female empowerment. In fact, not only is it presented as compatible, it is stressed as imperative. The belief that women 'can' now explore their sexualities and pursue and experiment with sexual pleasure has been transformed into the belief that women 'should', as claiming the right to sexual pleasure is now presented as a necessary and pivotal component of claiming the right to be a strong, empowered and liberated woman. Sexual pleasure and exploration is a duty that women not only have in terms of maximising the success of their relationships, but a duty that they have to themselves as liberated women.

There is no doubt that sexual autonomy can and should play a pivotal role in the liberation of all women. Yet, within the climate of popular feminism, the sexual agency being offered to women is cast within very specific expectations. The goal of this new popular feminism, as it is presented within the popular media, is not to challenge or disrupt traditional conceptualizations of sexuality within Western culture, as was the goal of many second wave feminists, but to recode or redefine them as empowering. Within the ideology of popular feminism, contemporary Western women have moved beyond the somewhat outmoded and misguided ideas of their second wave sisters, particularly those aspects which are considered as 'preaching these antimale, antisex sermons' (Quindlen 1996, 4). However, the important thing to remember is that, within mainstream Western culture, popular feminism promotes sexual exploration and women's sexual agency largely, if not solely, within the parameters of heterosexual sexuality. As such, traditional notions of masculine and feminine sexuality remain as pervasive and fundamental beliefs, as does the privileging of male heterosexual sexuality. The assumption, within popular feminism, is that having achieved social and sexual liberation, women are now in an empowered position and are able to engage willingly and knowingly with, and celebrate the pleasures of, traditional notions of sexuality, without the dangers of exploitation.

There is now within popular culture an increasing emphasis on women's right to sexual pleasure. Women are encouraged to explore their sexualities, to take control and demand sex, how and when they want – 'do me feminists' (Quindlen 1996, 3), and a great deal of contemporary sex advice literature adheres to this philosophy. For example, in *Sex Secrets of Escorts: Tips from a Pro*, Veronica Monet (2005, 261-262) proclaims that 'sex is not something that is done to us, it is something we are free to initiate as well as accept'. Unfortunately, women are not merely 'free' to initiate sex, it is in fact their 'responsibility' to do so. Women are frequently encouraged to take responsibility for and educate themselves. In *Hot Sex: How To Do It*, Tracey Cox (1998, 114) asks: 'do you think it's his responsibility to 'give' you and orgasm? No-one can 'give you an orgasm; you have to 'take' one yourself'. As such, Cox (1998, 114) stresses that 'you must take responsibility for your own pleasure', and proclaims, 'change your attitude about educating yourself', 'make time to pleasure yourself' and 'teach yourself how to masturbate' because you should 'accept that you have to 'learn' how to orgasm'.

Importantly the strength and empowerment that a woman gains through pursuing sexual satisfaction, rests not only in self exploration and instruction, but in her ability to instruct and educate her male partner as well. Veronica Monet, a former porn actress and prostitute, suggests that if women aren't receiving sexual pleasure from their partner, it is because they have failed to appropriately instruct them. She states:

I have met more than a few men who, although married for years, were not terribly familiar with the female body. It wasn't for lack of interest or lack of trying. Apparently their wives did not encourage their curiosity (2005, 33).

With this, men are portrayed as more than willing and eager to learn, it is women who are letting the team down. In a special edition of *Cleo Magazine* (2007, 38), *Cleo Sex: The Hottest Bedside Guide Ever*, a section titled 'Pimp my Boyfriend' stresses to women that in order to 'get the moves you've always wanted' you need to 'turn him into a bedroom legend'. The need for women to explore their bodies and sexuality and communicate their needs to their partner is unquestionably of the utmost importance. Further, a consideration of each aspect would undoubtedly result in an increase in pleasure for both partners. However, these considerations, while legitimate, continue to be placed within the pervasive ideology of sexual liberalism. The question I am asking is: within women's pursuit of sexual agency, whose interests are being served?

In *How To Satisfy A Man Every Time*, Naura Hayden suggests to her female reader:

Many of us make love (actually we allow our husbands to make love), and because of our passivity, we don't make it exciting. We lie there and let him "do his thing", thinking that's all we need to do to keep him sexually satisfied (1999, 9).

As noted previously, within the ideology of sexual liberalism, sexual availability *per se* is not considered adequate if a woman is to regard herself as a fully empowered sexual agent, she must actively participate. While this emphasis pays lip service to women's active participation and assertiveness, it, not coincidentally, fulfils a primary requirement of male heterosexual sexuality. Veronica Monet (2005, 208) stresses that 'the male desire for female dominance' is 'extremely common'. She continues with:

I concluded that regardless of a man's station in life, he had experienced sex as something that women either accepted or rejected from him. Most men tire of this leadership role in their relationships with women and need a break from it. So although there was a drastic difference in how mild or extreme the desire to be controlled was, it was nevertheless a rather universal desire among men (2005, 207).

Further, the degree to which a woman is prepared to initiate, actively engage in, and/or dominate a sexual encounter is equated with the extent to which a woman is perceived as enjoying sex overall. Importantly, it is frequently suggested that the extent to which a woman is perceived by her male partner as enjoying sex is of primary importance in determining the level of sexual satisfaction a man receives. In *Hot Sex: How To Do It*, Tracey Cox offers these anecdotal accounts:

I think there's nothing worse than a girl who lies there like a sack of potatoes. If she doesn't seem interested, I'm not either. Moan, move, sprout Russian – do something to let us know if you're enjoying it. Alex, 32, architect. (1998, 219).

And:

Most girls treat your penis like it's a lollypop. Licking alone doesn't do a thing for me and most of the time they'll screw up their faces during oral, like it's some nasty object. You know she's only doing it because she thinks you expect her to. That's why if you meet a girl who gets off on giving you head, you're stoked. Danny, 18 gym instructor. (1998, 50).

The confidence and empowerment that is associated with assertive sexuality in women also conveniently increases her level of sexual desirability. Placed as it is within the tenets of sexual liberalism the sexual agency offered women within this ideology does not question or disrupt the privileging of male heterosexual desire, it merely recodes the pursuit of sexual desirability to one of female self empowerment.

To a significant degree sex advice literature adheres to popular feminism's notion of female empowerment. In fact, a fundamental strength of this new and improved 'feminism' is its

current monopoly of the market. Many women within mainstream Western culture have access to the women's movement only in terms of what the popular media provides. Therefore, the ways in which feminism is conceived and articulated within the popular consciousness is to a significant degree dependent upon the way in which the popular media chooses to, as Ednie Kaeh Garrison (2004, 25) has stated, 'characterise (or caricature) the women's movement'. Further, Garrison (2004, 25) has stressed that while a great deal of work has been done surrounding the contradictory uses of feminist and sexist imagery to encourage certain aspects of consumption, she has pointed out that 'we fail to fully understand how the media operates to ideologically re/contain the possible meanings attached to the object of feminism'. As previously mentioned, for many women with the mainstream, feminism is what popular culture and the mass media says it is, and popular feminism suggests that sexual liberalism is the road to female self empowerment. Sexual assertiveness, experimentation and variety have become so intimately tied to female empowerment that this conflation is seen not only as a road to female liberation but highly representative of the extent to which a woman is regarded, or comes to regard herself, as liberated:

For women are now supposed to orgasm (multiply, of course) within moments of the man entering our vagina. Not to do so is to expose your unliberated self – you are not a real woman (Gill and Walker, 1993, 70).

Popular feminism has attained such a pervasive hold within mainstream culture and within the popular imagination because it is, as Rosalind Gill (2000, 142) defines it, 'feminism-lite'. It appears to adhere to the fundamental principles of feminism, is acceptable to women who are hesitant to define themselves as feminist, and, most importantly, it is tolerable to the male establishment. The true appeal of popular feminism rests on the happy status quo that it maintains.

This containment of feminism has reduced a political movement to a style; a style that relies in no small part on a celebration of sexual assertiveness and sexual experimentation. All of which is premised on the fundamental assumption that sexual liberalism, that is male heterosexual sexuality, can and should be the road to women's self empowerment. While I agree that feminist theory and practice has not always spoken to the needs and aspirations of many women, I do not believe, nor does bell hooks (1996, 64) 'that we should strive to stimulate the interest by packaging a patronizing, simplistic brand of feminism that we can soft sell'. Most specifically we should be cautious in embracing a feminism which promotes the masculine notion of sexual liberalism and its concomitant reliance on the pursuit of female sexual desirability as the road to female empowerment.

Contemporary Western women still want sexual autonomy and empowerment and if, as I have stressed women's empowerment is essentially what popular culture and the mass media says it is, it is within the monopoly of this ideology that women are attempting to negotiate pleasurable and equitable heterosexual relationships. The use of this popular form of female empowerment within the discourse of sex advice, to which many women may well turn to for help or guidance, works to seriously inhibit their capacity to do so. In unison with the overriding and continuing emphasis on the importance of sexuality in maintaining successful and committed relationships, this form of female sexual agency encourages and reinforces women's participation within the ideology of sexual liberalism and the servicing of male heterosexual sexuality. The sexual assertiveness and aggressiveness that plays such a pivotal role in the representation of 'the sexually empowered woman' is likely to 'be met in the real world with a male public very much in the dark about [its] liberatory intent' (Rapping 1996, 272), particularly as it so conveniently fulfils the requirements of male heterosexual desire.

A primary consequence of this overriding belief within the popular imagination that women have now achieved social and sexual liberation has been offered by Ellen Willis, she has stated:

There is at present no socially legitimate public language in which women, particularly young women, can directly and explicitly express anger at the “mundane kinds of sexism”, or what I’ve called the sexism of ever day life...In a culture where men continually remind women, in obvious and subtle ways, “This is still a man’s world and you are still the sexual Other”, or “As I see it, your main function is to enhance the erotic environment” (1996, 46 & 48).

In concluding, the aim of this paper has been to show that the alignment of sexual liberalism with women’s sexual agency which was offered up as liberation during the period of ‘the sexual revolution’ has retained a pivotal place within the popular imagination. The use of this alignment, together with the continuing emphasis on the importance of sexuality in maintaining successful heterosexual relationships works, within the discourse of sex advice, toward the reaffirmation and reinforcement of the liberalist ideology that sexual exploration, experimentation and variety can and should be the road to female self empowerment. Finally, the containment of feminism, through its recoding and reconfiguration within the ideology of sexual liberalism, and the use of this form of popular female empowerment within the discourse of sex advice, has robbed contemporary women of the fundamental principle of female sexual autonomy – the option of saying ‘no thanks’ to the sexuality they are being offered, because there has to be a better way.

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