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BOOK REVIEW

## Queer Vibrations

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Lynn Comella. 2017. *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex-toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure*.

Durham: Duke University Press.

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Back in the mid 1980s, when I'd given up on my first attempt at a PhD and was working as a journalist for a fashion and culture publication, I came up with an idea for a story. I would go to a sex shop in Sydney's Kings Cross (the only sex shops I knew of) and buy up as many sex toys as the magazine's budget would allow. Then I would experiment with them, mainly on my own, and write about the experience. In those days before online publication and reader comments, it was difficult to know what the general response to my investigation was, though people in my social circle tended to mention it at dinner parties.

My understanding of feminism had always been informed by a belief that sexual liberation went hand in hand with women's liberation (a big shout out to old-school Germaine Greer, whose utopian writings about 'cuntpower' were wildly influential back in the day). Though this might seem like a ridiculous assumption in the groundswell moment of #MeToo, back then a lot of us believed that women should be able to initiate and pursue sexual pleasure without shame or moralistic judgement from others. Where I came from that felt like liberation. Although I knew about the uses to which a massager bought from a department store could be put (mine was a Sunbeam, but apparently the Hitachi Magic Wand was the 'go to' device for many), I was ignorant about the more overtly marketed sexual technology available.

The sex shop was predictably sleazy but I also remember it as sticky. Covered with the magic cloak of the journalistic investigator and armed with cash from my publisher, I bought

some implements that I thought had potential. I did not ask the salesman any questions, nor did he offer any opinion on my choice. The transaction was silent, or may as well have been. It was clearly unusual for a woman, especially a young woman, to be in the shop. But more than that, it simply did not occur to me that a sex shop assistant might be a repository of advanced information and expert advice.

At the time, I didn't know anything about the feminist sex shops that had started in the United States in the 1970s—Eve's Garden (New York) and Good Vibrations (San Francisco)—with the deliberate intention of creating a safe, pleasant and educational space for women interested in sex. Lynn Comella's excellent new book *Vibrator Nation* provides a cultural history of feminist sex-toy stores from the 1970s to the present, starting with an account of Betty Dodson's female masturbation workshops, run out of her Manhattan apartment in 1973.

Fifteen years in the making, Comella's book is the result of what she calls 'slow' scholarship, although the term had not been invented when she began. 'This research approach', she writes, 'involves slowing down and letting ideas percolate, emphasizing quality over quantity, and taking the necessary time to write, rewrite, and, ideally, get it right.' (ix) The project began in 1998 with the aim of exploring the history and current state of feminist sex-toy stores in the United States. This required a mixed methodology approach or what Comella terms 'methodological promiscuity' that included the usual archival research but also a six-month stint working at Babeland in New York in 2001 and 'mobile ethnography' that entailed visiting sex shops across the United States and conducting in-depth interviews with more than eighty feminist entrepreneurs, CEOs, sales staff, manufacturers, marketers and pornographers. Comella's object of study changed across the period of her research as feminist sex shops confronted the challenge of online shopping and the mainstreaming of sex positivity, a phenomenon that turned many into competitive businesses in the new arena of 'sex-positive capitalism'. Although the profit imperative emerged in tension with the more collaborative model that stores like Good Vibrations had pioneered, Comella argues that across the decades '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'. (13)

In the 1970s, the first feminist sex shop, Eve's Garden, had a political mission. Having been to one of Dodson's workshops, founder Dell Williams was inspired to provide women with a space to celebrate their sexuality and learn, with sex toys, to orgasm. Making such toys easily available to women was a tangible expression of women's liberation and consistent with Williams' interpretation of Wilhelm Reich's theories about sexual repression and the connection between orgasmic energy and political activism. For Williams, female orgasm was going to help dismantle patriarchy. Initially, Williams ran the business from her own home and via a mail-order service. Demand was high and within a year she opened a bricks-and-mortar shop next door to her apartment. In 1979, she opened an 'elegant' boutique in midtown Manhattan. Through all of this expansion, however, profit was a secondary consideration, a lesson Williams finally learnt to her cost.

To challenge the sticky, sleazy reputation of traditional style adult shops, interior design was vital. When Good Vibrations opened in San Francisco in 1977 it featured macramé wall hangings, a display of antique vibrators and hand-crocheted vibrator 'cozies'. The overall effect was clean and homely. Founder Joani Blank, a sex educator and therapist, was determined that her shop, 'especially but not exclusively for women', would serve customers of all sexual proclivities. Comella regards Good Vibrations as of historic importance insofar as it became

‘the standard bearer for a new model of sex shop that brought the techniques of sex therapy and the language of sex education into a retail environment’. (43) To appeal to female customers, rather than the usual clientele of adult stores, Good Vibrations provided a space that was ‘wholesome and women-friendly, not sleazy and male-oriented; clean, not dirty; and classy, not crass’. (92) Comella points out that these distinctions reinforce social judgements that value:

a commercially viable version of white, middle-class female sexuality that brings with it a tangible set of effects, including wider community acceptance from prospective landlords, neighborhood associations, and zoning boards. Making sex-toy stores ‘respectable’ is thus an intensely social process that is as much about race and class as it is about gender and sexuality. (92)

After this observation, the book becomes even more interesting as Comella tracks the tensions between sexual politics and race and class distinctions, particularly the conflicting logic of the boutique store versus a feminist philosophy of inclusion. Good Vibrations’ aim was to make a Marin county housewife feel safe and comfortable in a ‘respectable’ vibrator store. But this aim, argues Comella, is a ‘by-product of highly gendered and class specific discourses regarding cultural taste’ and a claim to moral authority. (99) However, for some customers, this respectability registered as ‘sexual sterility’. (107) Not every woman wants it clean.

The sex education role of feminist sex shops cannot be underestimated, especially in the United States where, depending on state law, the information provided to young people about sex is largely negative, either reinforcing abstinence or underscoring the dangers of disease, pregnancy and loss of reputation. What is generally missing is any discussion of female desire and sexual agency. The retail ‘sexpert’ in feminist sex shops stepped into this breach. The women on the floor had hands-on experience with the devices they were selling but what they were promoting was less the product than the sexuality it served. ‘Good Vibrations employees received more training about human sexuality than most doctors, and a core part of what they learned involved the concept of sex positivity’. (145) The feminist sales staff at Good Vibrations came to be known as ‘sex educators’, as are those at Babeland, Seattle, which was established in 2000 in a very different cultural moment. However, for Babeland founder Clare Cavanagh there remains a ‘fundamental link’ between discussion with customers about sex and the sale of sex toys. (147) As she reveals in interview, the entrepreneurial Cavanagh clearly sees her stores as ‘queering heterosexuality’ and her employees as queer ambassadors ‘exporting queer discourses and nonnormative sexual possibilities into the straight world’. As Comella explains it:

the act of queering is about disassembling normative ideas about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and bodies ... these queer rearticulations might include any number of things: a lesbian employee describing how to go down on a silicone dildo during a blowjob workshop, a heterosexual female customer who expresses her preference for gay male pornography, or a trans man teaching a workshop on G-spot ejaculation. (180)

Having finished reading *Vibrator Nation* I thought it might be time for a visit to my daughter Lucy’s place of work. Max Black is a sex shop in the hipster suburb of Newtown in Sydney. All the staff at Max Black identify as feminist and/or queer. Lucy had two weeks of sex educator training before she was allowed on the floor. When I walked in as Lucy’s mother the owners and staff embraced me like family. I showed them a copy of *Vibrator Nation*

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but they were already onto it. In fact, they have invited Comella to give a talk at their store this year. Lucy talked me through the toys. She answered the questions I had informatively, professionally. She told me about the dangers of phthalates, the toxic chemicals that are used to soften hard plastic and remain common in cheaper sex toys coming from China. The sex toy industry remains unregulated and there is much greenwashing going on by manufacturers claiming products are phthalate-free when they are not. As Lucy explained the toys in the backdoor play section, I began to feel, not for the first time, that our mother/daughter roles had reversed. I felt slightly infantilised, realising my daughter already knew far more about sexual behaviours than I ever would. ‘What is that board game *Monogamy* like?’ I ask. ‘I don’t know, probably boring. Would you like to see the rubber room?’ ‘Yes, darling.’ Having my sex education updated by my daughter could have been weird but, strangely, in this pleasant environment that queerly mixed retail and sex-positive activism, it wasn’t. Plus, I got a family discount. Lucy, we’re not in Kings Cross anymore.

### About the author

Megan Le Masurier is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. She has previously written on Germaine Greer’s concept of ‘cuntpower’ in *Australian Feminist Studies* and is currently writing a book, *Slow Magazines: Indies in Print in a Digital Age*.