

Introduction to "Sexy Feminisms? Trans-Formations in Feminist Sexuality Studies After Queer Theory"

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This issue poses *Sexy Feminisms* as a question so as to query where feminist theorizations of sexuality are today and where they are heading. In the call for papers, we referred back to the important 1984 Signs forum on "female sexualities," which described two presumably opposing camps of feminist responses to the sexuality debates: radical and libertarian. Contributors to this forum pointed out that both sides claim the other overlooks important aspects of female sexuality and pleasure. They concluded that these "opposing positions do not exhaust the possible feminist perspectives on sexual pleasure, sexual freedom, and danger" (107). We posed confidently that in the two decades since that important critical moment, feminist sexuality studies has moved well beyond the limiting poles of danger versus pleasure or prudes versus progressives.

If these opposing poles of pleasure versus danger marked the 1980s sexuality debates within feminist circles, in the 1990s a debate surfaced between feminist and the then just emerging new fields of lesbian/gay and queer studies. These latter fields and their theories owe in their emergence much to earlier feminist discourses of sexuality. Yet they often fail to acknowledge this intellectual and political heritage and, at times, position themselves squarely against feminism and women's studies. This was most clearly the case in the introduction to the immensely influential collection *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, which in 1993 made the following territorial claim: "Lesbian/gay studies does for sex and sexuality approximately what women's studies does for gender" (xv). The editors in their attempts to define their proper object reduced women's studies to "any research that treats gender (whether female or male) as a central category of analysis" and thereby de facto erased the study of sexuality from feminism.

Subsequently, Judith Butler (1994) strenuously refused the kind of aggressive appreciation that is enacted in such splitting of fields. Pointing out the ways that such designations reduce gender to biological

oppositional anatomies and attempt to sever the analysis of "the sex one is from the kind of sex that one does" (4), Butler's "Against Proper Objects" cites the rich body of feminist scholarship that emerged precisely as a refusal to accept gender as merely biological and anatomical binarisms. But perhaps more importantly, Butler names and rejects what the separation of lesbian/gay/queer studies from women's studies entails, namely "the desexualization of the feminist project and the appropriation of sexuality as the 'proper' object of lesbian and gay studies" (6). Such distinction of the two projects, and the reduction of women's studies to all things related to gender, effectively erases, once again, the constitutive history of "race" and "class" from either of the fields (21).

Such domain fights were not limited to field designations or the pages of (American) scholarly journals. In the Canadian context, the relationship between feminist and queer theory, between lesbian/gay and women's studies was worked out perhaps less in stormy public debates than in institutional formation processes and scholarly affiliations. The early 1990s saw the birth of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association (CLGSA), which, at the time, involved among its founders many with roots within women's and feminist studies. Presenters and organizers frequently initiated joint and co-sponsored events between CLGSA and the Canadian Women's Studies Association (CWSA/ACEF).

Yet the concern was sensed, at least by some, that increasingly sexuality was becoming the preoccupation of lesbian/gay and queer studies and that this work moved away from women's studies. This sense was heightened as CLGSA was set to rename itself. One of the options considered was Canadian Association for Critical Studies in Gender and Sexuality, which was also an attempt to embrace the emerging trans-movement. News of the impending name change evoked the fear that this could leave women's studies to address sexuality only as the site of women's subordination, danger, and violence. This fear was also a reflection of the fact that the history of radical feminist politics for sexual freedom, since at least the 1800s, has become increasingly invisible in women's studies. Many accorded this to feminist discourses of sexual victimization taking over, encapsulated in the anti-pornography movements since the 1980s and the MacKinnon-esque formulation of gender as fairly rigid positions of (masculine) sexual

domination and (feminine) sexual subordination. These preoccupations made little space for the complexities of sexual pleasure alongside or within fields of danger.

Moreover, rigid gendering also fuelled the refusal on parts of women's studies practitioners to engage the newly emerging queer, transgender and transsexual work. Their fear was that queer and trans-scholarship would lead to the deconstruction of "women," understood by some, as the field's foundational category and *raison d'être*. Yet a narrowly defined focus meant women's studies was (and is) not always a hospitable place for queer sexuality studies. This forced queer work to migrate elsewhere and risked leaving women's studies and feminist sexuality discourse impoverished by a too exclusive and narrow focus on gender subordination, at the exclusion of an analysis of the complex intersections of race, class, and sexuality.

At the same time, women's studies sustained enough of a critical mass that the emerging fields of queer transgender and transsexuality studies were engaged probably nowhere else more extensively than within women's studies, be it by way of curriculum inclusion and the hiring of trans-scholars. Indeed in recent years, trans-studies has become probably one of the more invigorating forces for feminism and women's studies.

Institutionally we see today a whole series of different patterns of program formation. LGBTIQ Studies and sexuality studies in the Canadian academy are emerging variously as distinct and separate degree granting programs under various names: Sexual diversity studies being one example, critical sexuality studies another. Some universities offer minors or concentrations in sexuality studies within existing women's studies programs. In other places, what used to be called women's studies programs have undergone a renaming process and are now called, for example, women, gender and sexuality studies. Curriculum transformation processes also made sexuality studies a central subfield within the continuously evolving (inter)discipline.

This volume is by no means the first time Atlantis has allocated space to feminist sexuality research. As one of Canada's leading women's studies forums, Atlantis has actively participated in the formation of feminist sexuality studies and its debates in the past. In 1998, Atlantis devoted an entire special issue to "Sexualities and Feminisms" (Volume 23.1). In 2004, Atlantis published a series of essays on

"Transphobia and Transactivism" at the beginning of a general issue (Volume 29.1).

The 1998 special issue sported an image from Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan's fabulous consciousness-raising performance video, "We're Talking Vulva," a video still screened in women's studies classrooms and beyond. The cover set the tone for an issue that, as the guest editors Janice Ristock and Catherine Taylor put it, featured "important work being done towards disrupting the production of heterosexual normalcy" and included "articles that trouble heteronormative notions of identity" (1998, 1). Nearly a decade later, the contributors to our volume build and expand upon those earlier incursions into the field. At least two contributions here address and reconfigure a perceived gap in feminist sexuality studies noted by Ristock and Taylor: Jenny Higgins's essay and the interview with Chanelle Gallant both focus on "feminist heterosexuality as a lived identity" (1998, 1). Labelling heterosexuality a "lived identity," however, presupposes a direct connection between sexual identity and sexual practice. As our conversation with Gallant makes clear, feminist heterosex practice need not be contingent upon a heterosexual identification.

Atlantis's 2004 mini special issue on "Transphobia and Transactivism" featured some of the leading voices in trans-studies in Canada. As Meg Luxton writes in her introduction, "The lives and activism of trans people pose major challenges to prevailing concepts of women and men, of femininity and masculinity" (2004, 3). While the 1998 volume focussed heavily on questions of sexual identity and marginalization, the trans-issue began to explode the premises of those identifications. Questions of identity continue to circulate through this current volume, but perhaps with a different emphasis.

Feminist sexuality studies has faced new challenges in the forms of queer theory, transgender, and transnational scholarship, as well as critical race, whiteness, and disability studies. Given these transformations, the goal of this special issue of Atlantis is to offer a glimpse into the current states of feminist sexuality studies in the wake of various theoretical and political influences. How have the above-mentioned theoretical and political movements transformed the ways we do and understand feminist sexuality studies today? What kinds of changes can we observe in the longstanding conversation that feminist theory has about

the status of sexuality?

In this special issue of Atlantis we are pleased to present work primarily by younger scholars, many of whom were (or are being) trained in some form or fashion in women's studies. Indeed among the twelve contributors and editors to this issue, at least eight hold one or more graduate degrees in women's studies, several are or have been teaching in women's studies. Thus it is not surprising that several of the authors begin their discussion by way of an explicit reference to women's studies' discussion of sexuality. This intellectual and political heritage informs the themes that emerge in this issue. We see a continued emphasis on the notion of danger, but the locus of the threat is differently located: sometimes the danger comes from within our communities and academic disciplines as well as from without.

As with previous feminist sexuality studies, the contributors to this volume highlight the revolutionary potential of sexual pleasure. Those pleasures continue to be found in places that defy a narrative of feminine sexual subordination, and unsurprisingly, several pieces espouse a manifestory tone. Kathryn Payne, Loree Erickson, and Chanelle Gallant revel in the emancipatory power of sexual pleasure, while Nina Martin is more sceptical about the liberatory potential of the pornification of culture.

Krista Scott-Dixon's article, which opens the issue, draws upon the work of feminist science scholars to argue for what she calls a "critical science of sex, gender, and sexuality." By this she means the use, rather than the dismissal, of scientific methods for studying bodies, all while maintaining a feminist commitment to social justice. Representations of bodies, and particularly bodies that defy the compulsory coherence of sex, gender, and sexuality, in two recent documentaries on gendered sex play for ftm trans men, are the object of Bobby Noble's article. He explores the constructions and implications of sexual incoherence for heteronormative sex categories and gender identifications.

The first of two creative contributions, Trish Salah's meditation on the dubious welcome offered to trans patrons of the first women's bathhouse powerfully conveys the sense of frustration involved in making feminist spaces trans positive. She follows her piece with a lengthy postscript that engages the fraught question of the differential valuing of ftm and mtf bodies in

queer feminist sexual economies, especially in the aftermath of the Pussy Palace raid.

The tension between sex as play and sex as work, as well as the blurring of the two, runs through several articles. Nina Martin analyses the current popularity of the claim to women's sexual empowerment, for example in form of CAKE Parties, pole dancing classes, and sex worker biographies. Regarding these phenomena as a sign of the mainstreaming of porn and sex work, she asks how such mainstreaming might affect an earlier understanding that saw sex work as queer, even subversive, precisely because of the stigma associated with the exchange of sex for money.

Loree Erickson's contribution offers the most explicit call to action. Offering pornographic self-portraits, Erickson draws attention to the terms of her own embodiment, an embodiment that refuses naturalization. By extension, she insists on the denaturalization and interdependence of all bodies, all embodiments.

Both Kathryn Payne and Chanelle Gallant move us from sex play to sex work and back. Payne's concern is with the absence of sex workers' knowledge and expertise from feminist theorizing of women's sexuality and pleasure, and with the limits that such absence poses. By way of an interview, Chanelle Gallant addresses the political dimensions of female sexual pleasure, the whore stigma, colonization of the female body, and feminist workshop pedagogy.

Jenny Higgins reflects her own research and her desire to infuse a project on contraceptive use with feminist theorizations of sexual agency and pleasure; something she found missing from public health research. In the process of conducting her research, she finds both her work in public health and the feminist theorizing of sexual agency challenged.

The volume concludes with three pieces focussing on feminist cultural production. Tal Dekel engages the ways women of color in the visual arts, especially American artist Kara Walker, rewrite the sexualized racial vocabularies of art history. Rebecca Hardie examines Karen Finley's performance art with a view to the ways in which Finley uses her body to reconfigure both performance conventions and sexual taboos.

An interview with Toronto-based artist Allyson Mitchell, a photo of whose work graces the cover of this

issue, concludes this special issue. Book-ending an issue entitled "Sexy Feminisms?" with Mitchell's art and words is entirely appropriate. The cover image of the reclining "Shebacca" Lady Sasquatch (on pink fun fur) takes its inspiration from 1970s Playboy images. Their recuperation implies continuation with a past, simultaneously sexist and sexy; yet rebuilding and recirculating these images also gestures towards change and the future, perhaps towards what Mitchell describes as "the sexy part of feminism--when things are political, practical and surprising."

Rounding out this intriguing collection, we include a poem by Gwen Bartleman describing her encounter with the statue of the Famous Five, and reviews of books from different perspectives in the "longstanding conversation" around feminism and sexuality.

This issue is possible only because of the provocative scholarship, art, and poetry offered by the contributors and the generous and thoughtful assistance of our anonymous peer reviewers. The guest editors of this issue would like to thank managing editor Cecily Barrie and general editor Rhoda Zuk for their careful and spirited guidance.

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