

Fucking Our Way to a Better World: An Interview with C. Gallant

C. Gallant manages Good For Her, a feminist sex store and education centre in Toronto. She is also a Gestalt therapist and writes a regular column for *Chatelaine* and other publications. She can be reached at girlaction5@hotmail.com.

Abstract

In this interview, C. Gallant, manager of Good for Her (gfh), a feminist sex shop in Toronto, discusses her experiences facilitating various workshops offered at gfh and addresses the political dimensions of female sexual pleasure, the whore stigma, colonization of the female body, and feminist workshop pedagogy.

Résumé

Dans cette entrevue, C. Gallant, gérante de Good for Her (gfh), un sex shop féministe à Toronto, discute de ses expériences lorsqu'elle présentait différents ateliers offerts à gfh et adresse les dimensions politiques du plaisir sexuel féminin, le stigmate de la putain, la colonisation du corps de la femme, et la pédagogie de l'atelier féministe.

Introduction

For the past three years, C. Gallant, a former sociology MA student, has managed Good for Her (gfh), a feminist sex shop in Toronto. Her job includes all the tedious aspects of a retail business - inventory, accounting - and the less tedious - sex education in the form of workshops offered at the store. The workshops at gfh constitute on-the-ground activism to encourage participants to reconsider their assumptions about sexuality and constitute feminist sexuality studies in practice. The workshops aim to counter widespread cultural anti-sex and anti-pleasure messages. Gallant describes this as her "dream job" in which she helps women to find ways to increase their own sexual pleasure, work she believes she could not do from within the academy. Gallant also spent three years as a Women's Bathhouse organizer and currently writes a sex advice column for *Chatelaine* magazine.

Rachel Warburton

What's the most surprising thing you've learned while working at gfh?

C. Gallant

Women's dissatisfaction with sex is much more widespread and profound than I thought. I had a woman come in yesterday, and she said she wanted some books on orgasm. So I start assuming that she's not orgasmic or that she doesn't orgasm very frequently and then we start talking a bit more and it turns out that she thought that she's dysfunctional because she doesn't orgasm during intercourse. I said, "You don't need a book on that because you're not dysfunctional. You can add a toy that'll give you clitoral stimulation during intercourse. That'd probably be a lot of fun for you, but you don't have a dysfunction." I was trying to wrest some control over the discourse, and say that you might not be happy with the fact that you don't orgasm from intercourse but I'm not going to carry on a conversation where we pretend you have a medical dysfunction. There's expectation and pressure on women about how we'll

come, how fast we'll come, what will make us come. There's also all these rules around what's supposed to make us come. It's ridiculous.

Rachel Warburton

On the subject of female sexual dissatisfaction, you were also surprised at how widespread women faking orgasm was and is.

C. Gallant

Yes. I do think that faking orgasm is a betrayal. To me, I see it as lying to your partner. You can lie by omission. I also see it as a betrayal of the self, because faking orgasm is about deciding that your pleasure isn't worth the effort it would take to orgasm. I also see it's about frustration, if you don't know what's going to make you come. What I find really astounding is when women do know exactly how to make themselves come and they're still not willing to tell their partners. Why can't you be honest with your partner? And say, "This feels great. I'm having a wonderful time, I'm really enjoying sex, but I'm not going to orgasm." Why isn't it acceptable for you to just not have an orgasm? For things to feel really good? To say, "I'm really enjoying sex, but I'm not going to have an orgasm." Then, there's a much higher likelihood that, in that space you create, something new could happen. Maybe you will discover what's going to lead to your orgasm.

Women give up easily on their own pleasure, especially when they're younger. As women get older they care more and more about their own pleasure. That's why quite often you don't see women in a sex shop until their thirties. They go through their twenties having...god only knows what kind of sex, and then in their thirties, they think, "OK there's probably something better than this." So they start doing things like coming to a sex shop, and getting the lubricant they need, giving themselves clitoral stimulation during intercourse, starting to use toys, being willing to risk.

Rachel Warburton

At gfh you're currently offering several workshops: muff-diving for men, talking in the bedroom for women, sexual confidence for the shy, the sophisticated hand job, and giving head. Muff diving

for men is clearly feminist and without a doubt makes the world a better place. How do the participants respond to that one in particular?

C. Gallant

That's such a fun workshop. I love teaching "Muff Diving for Men" because the guys are so enthusiastic. I feel so good about the state of the world after I've had seventeen men in a room tell me how much they love muff diving, and they're eagerly learning more. They are so committed to their partner's pleasure, genuinely curious about her body, enthusiastic about sex and about pleasure. It's great. And then I get to teach them more about how to do it and send them off into the world. It's fun teaching people who actually like sex.

The older men in the workshop always know more than the younger ones. They know more because they've had time for their partners to actually tell them truths that are not found in our culture and that women are not supported in telling. I ask them how long it takes for a woman to come and the older ones laugh. One of them will usually answer, fifteen to twenty minutes to the surprise of the younger ones. I tell them to get down there and set their watches. If you're always "finished" after 2-3 minutes, she's faking it. Some women, it'll only take a couple months to tell their partner, some women years, some women never. They'll just fake for their whole lives. Some days I find it extremely demoralizing. It's demoralizing to see someone treat their pleasure as so incidental, so secondary.

Rachel Warburton

Which is the most popular workshop?

C. Gallant

"Giving Head" is an enormously popular workshop. We can barely keep up with demand. We have women banging down the doors. Our staff have been yelled at, cried to. We've had women yell, cry, beg, bribe, plead, cajole in order to get into the workshop.

At this moment in contemporary culture, there is an enormous reward for women who are good at giving head. Young women are very conscious of the fact that this makes them really hot property if they know how to give good head. It's a kind of resource they can trade in their relationships because

femininity is a form of capital and so is masculinity. Gender is a form of cultural capital. Being good at giving head enhances your femininity. It didn't a hundred years ago but it does right now.

Rachel Warburton

This is not about an emphasis on female sexual pleasure, then?

C. Gallant

No. I teach it that way. I teach it from a perspective of how you can enjoy giving head more, and people have told me they like that I teach the workshop from a focus on female pleasure, but they're not taking it for that reason, and it doesn't occur to them that they could take it for that reason. That's sort of a pleasant surprise.

There's quite a noticeable class difference between the women who attend the "Giving Head" workshop and other workshops. They've got all the trappings of femininity. They're invariably very thin, very tanned. They have silky, long pony tails, expensive clothing, in every way embodying our ideal of femininity right now. Femininity is high class work. It takes a lot of money to be feminine.

I was born to a single mom and raised working class, and I'm queer and so I've never felt like being the feminine ideal was even an option for me. When I look at women who are striving for that I'm amazed how limiting it is, how limited their own pleasure is. They can't just be into their own pleasure and think, "Fuck all that shit that I was raised to believe. I'm going to go out and have a great time and have fucking awesome sex and get off." If you do that, you're a whore. If you're a whore, you take a plunge class-wise.

Rachel Warburton

Do you out yourself in your workshops?

C. Gallant

Mostly, yeah. I do it even though most of my workshop participants are not queer. I out myself because being honest about who I am humanizes me. Even if I'm talking about something I don't share in common with the other women, the fact that I'm being honest puts me on more of their level. That's

part of my attempt to meet women where they're at, to share a little bit about how I made my decisions.

Rachel Warburton

That also has the advantage of emphasizing that we have decisions to make about sexuality.

C. Gallant

That's why I out myself as bisexual in my "Giving Head" workshops. It's part of the story about how I came to enjoy having sex with men. I gave myself the option of not doing it, and I enjoyed men's bodies so much more when I stopped. I chose to stop having sex with men and that's what allowed me to feel curious and open and desiring of their bodies. That's so clearly why I can enjoy sex with men the way I do. Stopping and starting again later also gave me permission to be completely ignorant about how to have sex with men. Why should I know how to do this? I hadn't had sex with a guy since I was 20. As I tell my workshop participants, if I had learned anything about sex by the time I stopped sleeping with men I'd forgotten it. I knew nothing. And so I had to get men to teach me. I would just experiment and say, "Hey, how does this feel?" and poke and prod and lick. I wasn't ashamed and mortified and thought there was something wrong with me for not knowing how to have sex with men. I feel like I still have a lot to learn about who I am sexually. So, I'll be in a moment where I'm not sure what to do and then I'll start trying to remember a workshop. [Laughter] Thinking, what's a move I haven't tried yet? God, I hope my lovers don't read this. So, I learned, and that's something I tell women: It's ok to be ignorant, to not know what you're doing, and it's ok not to want to.

Rachel Warburton

What do you hope the workshops achieve?

C. Gallant

One of the things women get out of the workshops, that's really exciting to see, is they leave with confidence. They feel stronger. They feel less ignorant, ashamed. It's really not just about what we're teaching. It's about the way we teach. There's something that feels really good about someone just being really honest with you about sex. People feel like this rock has come off their backs. Finally, someone has told me the big secret that it seems like

everybody else knows. Also, I think, sitting in a room with other women and finding out that other women struggle the exact same way they do with sex is really reassuring and comforting. They learn about their own bodies, no matter what they're taking. Even when they learn about giving head, when I describe the male anatomy I describe how it correlates to female anatomy. So they're also going to get more knowledge about their own bodies.

After I'd been working at gfh for over a year, I went to a g-spot workshop. I thought I knew about my g-spot. I know where it is and all that stuff, but I was amazed at how much more I learned about my own body. There's so much about sex that we're so in the dark about and nobody feels good in a state of ignorance.

Rachel Warburton

How do we remedy our culture-wide female sexual dissatisfaction? To shift to an emphasis on female pleasure?

C. Gallant

Really, it's about ideology, about our ideas about female sexual pleasure. Part of that is that there is just widespread misinformation. There is just absolute ignorance about, for example, the fact that the vagina is not our sexual organ. The clitoris is.¹ That just absolutely astonishes me that that's not widely recognized. Something I've noticed really works is having women talk to each other. A lot of it is to what degree you're going to accept these half-truths about yourself, about women and what's normal. What happens is just like consciousness raising. When you have a group of women talking explicitly about their sex lives and about what they like and what they don't like, they really gain courage from it, and they realize that they're normal. So, that I know works.

Self-exploration and education also work. A lot of women haven't really looked at their own bodies. A lot of straight women have never seen a vulva. They haven't even looked at their own. I wouldn't have either. It was Pat Califia who told me to. I was in third year and I was coming out and I was worried that I didn't know how to have sex with a girl.

Rachel Warburton

Because girls are so complicated ... [Laughter]

C. Gallant

I called up *Glad Day* and I said, "Do you have anything like *The Joy of Sex* but for lesbians?" I went down and bought *Sapphisty* and one of the things Califia said was to look at your own vulva. So I got out a mirror...

Once you accept that the cultural messages you get have often been backwards, wrong, anti-feminist, then find out what's true. Read *A New View of a Woman's Body*. That one's really important in terms of understanding the actual structure of the clitoris and how there's six more inches of clitoris buried underneath.

Rachel Warburton

You've been talking about individual activism, consciousness raising, which is hugely important. What about the larger social contexts we need to address in order to create a culture that values female sexual pleasure? How do we go about addressing those?

C. Gallant

Part of this is about recognizing and validating female sexual agency. I think the criminalization of sex frames the ways we allow ourselves to feel pleasure. Can it be a coincidence that the only way we're allowed to feel pleasure is by the insertion of a man's penis into our vagina in the context of holy matrimony? Everything else we do we know is a deviation from that. Women have all kinds of sex other than that, but the only kind that they know they're really allowed to have is the kind that is owned, where your sexuality is owned by a man.

Rachel Warburton

You think that the way we talk about sex work in relation to female sexual pleasure is a mistake.

C. Gallant

Absolutely, it's a huge mistake. People aren't able to see it as work. They simply refuse to hear the voices of sex workers and talk about it as a form of work. Some academics talk about sex work in a way that is more as sex than as work. Similarly, when I talk

about my job, it's a total conversation killer, because what I've introduced isn't work. It's sex. Almost invariably, people blush, they become uncomfortable. People can't really see me as a worker anymore. If I mention my job, it's who I am as a person. What I've said is assumed to be much more revealing about who I am as a person, and assumed to mean that I don't actually work. My work is absolutely distinct from my own sexual pleasure. People do not know about my pleasure when I tell them what I do. I'm a retail manager, for god's sakes.

I also see this inability to take a clear-eyed view of sex when someone comes into a sex toy store and they can't stop giggling. Even though our culture seems sex-saturated, there's very little comfort around it.

Rachel Warburton

Do you think we need to shift the focus and start thinking about what the criminalization of sex does to own understanding of sexual pleasure?

C. Gallant

Everything related to our own pleasure is tainted with the whore stigma. Even with people who are sex-positive, I find, there's still an anti-whore ideology that works its way in. So, that's why it takes women so much longer than men to feel entitled to their own pleasure. A woman has a choice, she has a right, if she wants to fuck and get paid for it, it is her right. What some feminists forget is that it's still her body. It's offensive to me that feminists went to the wall for a woman's right to abortion. Nobody thinks abortion sounds like fun. Intrinsically it doesn't sound like a good time and yet we have no problem defending a woman's right to an abortion, a free legal abortion, as many as she needs, as late as she wants. Yet, if a woman says, "I want to do something for money that I might even get pleasure out of," that's not acceptable.

Our culture tells us that you have to have sex with someone you're in a committed relationship with or you have to hate being paid for it. I don't know how much of the dissatisfaction I hear from women in the workshops is genuine, although I think a lot of it is, but I also think there's also a cultural imperative to say you don't like sex, that you're basically doing it as a duty. Women who are married

with kids often joke about sex as a duty. This is not different from the kinds of critiques made of marriage in the 60s and 70s, that it was a disguised form of prostitution. The problem is thinking you need to abolish prostitution. That's not the problem. Yes, I know sex work is fucking. I know it's exciting and funny and scary and giggly. But what happens to the women who are in the massage parlours? How are they being paid? What's the management system?

Debbie Brock's book *Making Work, Making Trouble* is a brilliant example of writing about sex work. She's not moralizing and she's not trying to look deep inside prostitutes' souls. Instead of flights of fancy about what sex work *means*, she writes about the actual development of a discourse of prostitution as a social problem in Canada. Read *Making Work, Making Trouble*, then you can see what happens after the twittering, the nervous giggling, the hand-wringing moralizing.

Rachel Warburton

Can you talk about the role of gfh in creating a culture that emphasizes female sexual pleasure?

C. Gallant

First of all, the store was created as a place to support the workshops, through direct sex education. A lot of people come to us through our workshops. The angle in there is that they are learning how to pleasure their partners. And then, incidentally, we also mention to them, you know...how about a vibrating ring? Or lube? Something to increase their own pleasure.

People are so astounded at how good the workshops are and it's not rocket science. All we do is we sit in a room and we talk really honestly about how to have sex. Now I really know what they mean when they say the sex education you get in high school isn't pleasure-focussed: It means no-one's going to tell you that the frenulum is the most sensitive spot on a man's penis. Or that the glans of the clitoris has twice as many nerve endings as the shaft of the penis, or that the vagina swells and extends by a third when a woman's aroused.

Rachel Warburton

What makes gfh different from other sex stores?

C. Gallant

The store's about a different view of sex, where sex is about genuine pleasure. We don't make fun of sex, we just have it, and do our very best to enjoy it. We will do everything we can to help men and women have more sexual pleasure, but I don't think that novelty items such as penis straws really add to that pleasure. That's mocking sex. Sex is so much fun. It's ironic how by making fun of sex you lose the fun of it.

The other thing that makes gfh different is the way that the store is designed - down to little details from the lighting, to the chairs, to the customer service, to the products we offer - it's all designed to meet women where they are. Everything is designed to make a woman feel more comfortable because if she's more comfortable she can be a bit more honest and she's much more likely to get what she wants, what she genuinely needs. It's not garish, fluorescent lighting. The whole idea is that the place will feel warm and will feel somewhat like the woman's living room. There's a reading nook at the front. That's not an accident. It's right near the door because we know that's the place where someone who's uncomfortable is going to stop. They're going to need some time to acclimatize. They're in a sex shop; it's a little overwhelming. There's this whole row of purple and blue vibrators and dildos. Maybe they need a minute to kind of adjust. Well, you can hang out in the book nook.

Rachel Warburton

What attitudes toward women's bodies come up most frequently in the workshops, either from men or from women?

C. Gallant

It is still a common belief that there's something wrong with female genitals, that they're smelly or dirty. That's pretty common, more from women than from men. I've gone down on women, and if you've gone down on women you know that we're fine. We taste fine, we look fine. We're great. If you actually like women's bodies, you probably like our pussies too. I think one of the most reassuring things a woman can do is see more real naked female bodies. I always tell people to look at a book called *Femalia*, because it has images of vulvas.

Rachel Warburton

What about attitudes toward men's bodies? What things come up most commonly?

C. Gallant

Women don't like them that much. I was amazed because I'm bisexual and went for a long time where I wasn't involved with men and when I started sleeping with guys again I assumed that the reason women slept with men was because they liked them and liked their bodies! [*Laughter*] I think there's a really strong prohibition against saying you do like men's bodies. It's much easier for women as a group to kind of giggle and deride male bodies but they'll rarely talk about what they find erotic about guys' bodies. I don't think I've ever heard a woman say how much she likes her partner's dick. I've had women sort of suggest it and then blush eight shades of purple and look down while everyone else giggles because that's a really risqué thing to say. Just think about how little pleasure that allows you. If you're not even allowed to like the person you're fucking.

Rachel Warburton

So we have a culture in which women can't like women's bodies and they can't like men's bodies.

C. Gallant

Yes. They're allowed to like men for all kinds of reasons but they're not allowed to just like their bods.

Rachel Warburton

Do you think there's an element of the revenge of the disenfranchised group?

C. Gallant

Certainly, part of the teasing commentary that goes on about men's bodies is about recouping some power in the relationship. Especially, when you think about it, in a relationship where women's bodies are so controlled and surveilled. They're constantly surveilling their weight, their body hair, their clothing, their skin, and so, they turn some of that into revenge on men. It's one of the ways that women bond. Women certainly look for comfort in each other when they complain about men, or they tease men or put them down.

Rachel Warburton

You'd rather have women bond through talking about the details of their own sexual pleasure.

C. Gallant

That would be nice. It would be very different if we could bond over what we actually enjoy. There's such a starvation economy when it comes to pleasure.

Rachel Warburton

You joined the Women's Bathhouse Committee in 2000 and were a member at the time of the raid. In 1999, the Committee had begun staging occasional bathhouses as places where women and trans people could explore their/our sexuality. In contrast to men's bathhouses, of which there are several that run 24/7, the women's bathhouse ran for one (week)night once every three months. On September 14, 2000, Toronto Police raided the women's bathhouse. The five plainclothes male officers spent the better part of two hours wandering around the bathhouse, looking around, knocking on doors, and talking to several women. Finally, the police laid liquor licence violation charges against the two women whose names were on the temporary permit. After a lengthy and costly legal battle, those charges were dropped and the police were required to establish anti-homophobia training and to develop a trans policy for conducting searches. (At time of this writing, the police have not yet fulfilled the terms of the settlement.) How has the experience of the Women's Bathhouse raid and its aftermath affected your understanding of feminist sexuality and influenced the work that you do?

C. Gallant

The Bathhouse raid really did change everything. The Committee went on, but I left it after three years. They continue to host bathhouses, but for me it's never been the same. For me it was quite sad. There was a real loss there because I felt like I lost a sense of playfulness and freedom that I'd had before. As naïve as it sounds, it never occurred to me that there would be police intervention in the women's bathhouse. I saw it as Our Party. It was something that queer women did for ourselves so I could never imagine why the state would have any interest in it. For me, the Bathhouse was a queer sex playground and that got lost and I no longer see the women's

bathhouse that way. Now, it's a bit more about staying sexual defiantly, which is such a different thing because then at the centre of your sexuality is the police. It's now in response to them. Even when you're rebelling, even when you're doing something defiantly, you make the thing you're rebelling against the centre, unfortunately.

Since the raid, sex culture has gone a bit more underground, kind of like being lesbian in the 40s, before the bars in the 50s. If you're risking a raid then what do you do? You go to somebody's house. You don't do it at a bar. Earlier this year I went to a private sex party the night after the bathhouse. The sexual energy of the sex party was, I hate to say it, a hundred times better. There was so much more casual flirtation, sexual tension, playfulness, exploration, fun than there was at the bathhouse.²

Rachel Warburton

Thanks, C., for your candour. A world with more pleasure can only be a good thing.

C. Gallant

You're welcome, Rachel. It was a pleasure.

Endnotes

1. This is a bit of an intentional overstatement. Can you imagine grown women who don't know what their clits are for? I can - I've met them. I know that many women get a great deal of pleasure from their vaginal opening, the g-spot, the anterior fornix and their cervix. As well, vaginal stimulation may provide some women with indirect clitoral stimulation - but this is hotly contested and I remain agnostic about this debate. Having said all that, our clitoris is our only exclusively sexual organ and according to *The New View of A Woman's Body*, the clitoral legs (crura) run underneath our labia down to the outside of the vagina, but not inside it. I conclude that the vagina and clitoris are connected to some extent but different enough to distinguish them as two different organs. I think this differentiation accomplishes two things, discursively and politically: it brings the clit into clear focus and also reflects that women actually report that they experience very different sensations from vaginal vs. clitoral stimulation. One of myths I have to challenge regularly is the myth that an orgasm from penetration is vastly preferable (normal, healthy, sexy)

to an orgasm from external stimulation, such as direct clitoral stimulation. I've talked to many women who never orgasm with their partners and are faking because they find it too embarrassing to tell (usually) him that they will never orgasm from intercourse but would from a well-placed hand on her clit. I'm fed up with this mutually maintained delusion about our vaginas. In these specific cases, I put the vagina where it belongs: secondary to the clit.

2. For a more detailed discussion of the Women's Bathhouse raid and its aftermath, see Jennifer Blair, "What We Do Well": Writing the Pussy Palace into a Queer Collective Memory" *torquere*. 6 (2004): 143-67.

References

Blair, Jennifer. "What We Do Well": Writing the Pussy Palace into a Queer Collective Memory" *torquere*. 6 (2004): 143-67.

Brock, Deborah. *Making Work, Making Trouble*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Califa, Pat. *Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1988.

New View of a Woman's Body. Los Angeles: Feminist Health Press, 1991.

Rosen, Michael. *Femalia*. San Francisco: Down There Press, 1993.