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Lynn COMELLA, Vibrator Nation: How feminist sex toy changed the business of pleasure

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I have presented my English translation here.

“Believe me; women have money” (p. 2). This quote comes from *Vibrator Nation* author Lynn Comella’s interview with a producer (Associate Professor at the University of Nevada). This book is about women’s pleasure as a market and, more specifically, how feminism contributed to the formation of this market, beginning in the 1970s. The book is based on research from private and public archives, observations (particularly at trade shows), participant observations in a New York feminist sex shop, and 88 interviews with sex industry professionals and feminist activists.

Vibrator Nation is also a history of the feminist sex toy in the United States and the pornographic film market aimed at women, with a strong desire to trace the portraits of its forefathers. This is one of the book’s first surprises: The history of sex toys is, at first, a history of women. This is evident in the first chapter, “The Business of Masturbation,” which examines the rise of workshops where women learned to masturbate and use vibrators. It details Dodson’s pioneering role and specific descriptions of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1973.

Lynn Comella describes spaces where women can freely discuss their sexuality while also learning to masturbate and, eventually, use a sex toy. The message of these meetings could be summarised as follows: “If women can control their orgasms . . . they can also consider controlling their lives (p. 27). From then on, publications on the subject (such as *Our Bodies and Ourselves*) proliferated, and proponents of a humanist approach to sexology-established forums, such as the National Sex Forum, among sex professionals. This variety of events allows us to think about women’s masturbation without feeling guilty.

Dell William, in this context, opened *Eve’s Garden*, a sex shop specialising in female sex toys in New York at the beginning of the 1970s. Dell William began his business by selling sex toys at home every afternoon Friday. He gradually became more professional in establishing catalogues, returning customers, renting premises, etc. Sexologists and sex professionals recommend this ostensibly feminist establishment, and some orders have been placed abroad.

The second chapter describes the Good Vibrations Store, founded by Joanna Blank, a sex therapist. Blank rose to prominence in the 1970s as an expert on female masturbation; she was the author of *The PlayBook for Women About Sex and Good Vibrations: The Complete Woman’s Guide to Vibrator*. Lynn Comella explains how she responds to a central question raised by these sex entrepreneurs: How can we reconcile the imperative of economic profitability with feminist ethos (supposed to represent values of community and selfless activism)?

This question runs through the following chapters. For example, the advertisements and communication support of sex shops return to feminist and militant iconography; entrepreneurs desire to put forward feminine pleasure, in contrast to the so-called traditional sex shops, which are directly aimed at the male public.

This is demonstrated in Chapter 3 by Lynn Comella, who describes her experience as a “staff-sex educator” at the Babeland store, a “feminist sex-toy retailer”. Staff members, for example, use highly constructed discourse to demonstrate that their job is more than “just selling dildos”. Indeed, the author’s description of “traditional’ sex shops in Chapter 4 presents these distinctions. The differences between the feminist sex shop

and the "A-action" sex shop in Las Vegas (where women do not have to pay, but which is primarily a place for gay flirtation) are noticeable and assumed.

Feminist sex shops are designed to oppose these establishments in terms of the decor and products offered. In another example, in feminist sex shops, the goods are removed from the packaging, whereas in "traditional" sex shops, the goods are still in the packaging (often depicting naked women). The reasons are questions of taste, practicality, emphasising the product and its functions, the need to touch, contact, and so on. These stages highlight the fact that these objects are not products like others. There is a whole discourse of distinction on behalf of the entrepreneurs and employees who make their sex shops "respectable" places rather than a "traditional" sex shops where only the economic imperative counts.

We can also see the emergence of the theme of 'bad taste, even if the author does not explicitly state it. They start with sold products, and Chapter 5 returns on this distinction. Feminist sex shops, for example, do not sell penis-shaped candies, poppers (a highly profitable product), or lingerie. Selling erotic and pornographic films was also prohibited until the early 1990s.

The necessity of their presence in activist stores has been hotly debated. Employees insist on the militant and artistic dimension of the pornographic films that are eventually sold in stores: it is not simply masturbatory support, as a "traditional" pornographic film would be. The same sense of distinction, with the products' quality, sold and established a market for environmentally friendly and nontoxic sex toys. These stores defend the concept of being places for which customers care.

This aspect is reflected in Chapter 6, where the author proposes the sociology of sex workers, specifically feminist sex shop employees, who should be more than just salespeople but also sex educators. As a result, certified sexology training is required for employment in these shops. In this regard, Chapter 7 questions the relationship between female employees and entrepreneurs and feminism, mainly through the issue of employee diversity (for a long time, all employees were white), as well as the place of men in these businesses composed almost entirely of women.

Vibrator Nation concluded with the concrete conditions of these businesses' existence: while most were eventually profitable, they faced numerous challenges in their early days. These sex shops rely on entrepreneurs with relatively well-endowed capital (economic, cultural, and social), and it is interesting to note the actual discomfort for both employees and owners in admitting that they are making money on sexuality and for what appears to be a good cause.

Consequently, these feminist sex shops seem to be one-of-a-kind. This question is especially pertinent to the Internet age and the establishment of online platforms to sell sexual services. This statement sparks a fascinating debate on the future role of these hybrid devices in activist spaces and businesses. However, the book ends without addressing the metamorphosis.

Vibrator nation is an essential and unpublished contribution to the history of sex positivity and, more broadly, to approaches to the socioeconomic of sexuality, even if the theoretical framework of socioeconomic is not used extensively here. However, it is surprising that the government appears to have played an insignificant role in establishing these stores. Reading this book gives the impression that these collectives and businesses exist solely due to entrepreneurs' goodwill.

Lynn Comella pays little attention to what makes these legal sexual businesses possible. While it is possible to assume that this absence of the state is partially true (the legislator may be overly cautious regarding sexuality), it is never absent from these issues. Finally, it is unfortunate that little space is devoted to describing "traditional" sex businesses. Their comparison would allow a better understanding of a differentiation strategy in the entrepreneurs' speeches, avoiding a bleak vision of "traditional" sex shops.