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## Women's Sex-Toy Parties: Technology, Orgasm, and Commodification

Martha McCaughey and Christina French

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents participant-observation research from five female-only sex-toy parties. We situate the sale of sex toys in the context of in-home marketing to women, the explosion of a sex industry, and the emergence of lifestyle and body politics. We explore the significance of sex toys for women as marketed in female-only contexts, paying particular attention to the similarities and differences with Tupperware's marketing of plastic that promises happiness to women. We argue that sex-toy sales follow the exact patterns of Tupperware sales but, since the artifacts sold are for the bedroom rather than the kitchen, foster an even greater sense of intimacy between the women— which has both positive and negative consequences for thinking critically about the commodification of sexuality, bodies, and lifestyles in our capitalist culture. Vibrators and other sex toys constitute the technological route to a self-reflexive body project of female orgasm. We ask to what extent such a body project, achieved primarily through an individualistic, capitalistic consumption model, can offer a critique of normative discourses of heterosexual sex and identity. Is this new plastic purchased at parties liberatory or just another form of containment? In other words, how much Tupperware does a woman really need to buy, before she's been bought?

*"My other ride is a Rabbit Pearl"*  
automobile bumper sticker

### Introduction

What could be better than a group of women being introduced to vibrators and other toys that focus sexual pleasure on themselves rather than their partners? What could be more feminist than women

talking about sex and their own pleasure in a spirited and nonmedical setting? This article explains the contemporary sex-toy party, its principles of operation, and what women say and do there, while posing questions about the influence of technology and capitalism on sexual politics. We see women's sex-toy parties as embodying central tensions in feminist theory and politics today, specifically surrounding questions of the body, technology, capitalism, and feminist critiques of phallogentric sexuality.

We attended five women-only sex-toy parties in Virginia between us, and attended one together, at which we served as the party hostesses. Before, during, and after the parties we spoke informally with the party guests and two sex-toy saleswomen (party dealers), making notes about and discussing our observations after the parties. Some of the participants at the parties knew that we were writing something about the phenomenon but most did not. One party dealer knew and the other did not. We gave pseudonyms to every party participant we mention in the article. In addition to talking informally with and observing participants, we examined some of the materials that sex-toy party dealers have, the product catalogs, and the products themselves. Though feminist interests about gender and inequality informed our concerns, observations, and interpretations, our method of inquiry follows a much more general research scheme in sociology: participant-observation research. By immersing ourselves in the sex-toy party scene, we have gained a sense of these parties, the atmosphere of the parties, the discourse among party goers, sales techniques used by dealers, and overall dynamics of the phenomenon. Participant observation, in other words, enabled us to get a sense of women's sex-toy parties and use this knowledge of them to address feminist questions about technology, orgasm, and commodification. (See McCaughey [1997] for an earlier example of such research.)

### **The *Mis-en-scene* of Women's Sex-Toy Parties**

Farah (a pseudonym), an energetic platinum blond, walks in carrying huge plastic containers of "romance-enhancement" products. She eyes the brownies and tortilla chips that we, the women hosting the party, have laid out for the guests. Though told by the com

Figure 1

Woman with Feather Boa



pany owner not to eat at parties, she goes for a chip complaining, “God, I hate SlimFast!” While explaining that she’s on a diet because the medication after a recent operation caused her to gain weight, Farah sets up for the party in which she will demonstrate, describe, and sell sex toys to women.

The parties are bound by rules governed by her corporation, Pleasures (a pseudonym), and by state law. For example, no children

under 18 or men are allowed on the premises where a sex-toy party takes place. The sex-toy party plan works the same way other in-home marketing plans work. The product dealer/distributor (i.e., the sex-toy saleswoman) gets a hostess to invite around twelve to twenty-five of her friends to her house for a four-hour party, where the seller markets the products. Some parties are arranged for bridal showers, baccalaureate parties, or entire college sororities (in which case parties are larger than average).

Products from feathers, oils, lotions, and handcuffs to anal beads, dildos, and vibrators are discussed in a sex-positive, sexy, and fun way. Uproarious laughter surrounds the event—in part because dealers are quick with jokes about the use of the products, and in part because some women are embarrassed passing around vibrating “beavers,” elaborate multi-speed, remote-controlled “Rabbit Pearl” vibrators, and huge brown “Chocolate Fantasy” vibrating

dildos.

Saleswomen castigate men in various ways throughout their explanations of the products. For example, when showing the drypowder spray, Farah explains that this is good on your body, in your shoes during the summer, and even on your sheets “on the wet spot, which is *always* your spot and not his spot.” Another product shown is a cream to use on the man’s penis, which pre-

Figure 2

Photo of Brown Dildo



vents him from achieving orgasm for at least thirty minutes. This is presented as the solution for women who’d like their man to last long enough for them to be able to achieve orgasm during intercourse—or as one dealer put it at a party, “long enough to get through a whole CD!” Women whose partners have the opposite problem can buy other creams that get a man excited. Technology is presented as the answer to absent, insensitive, or otherwise inadequate male sex partners.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the sexual explicitness inherent in the event, the sex-toy party atmosphere attempts to retain some sense of refinement by avoiding putatively dirty words for body parts. This means words like “pussy” and “beaver” are avoided (though some products are named “beaver” and are discussed by name) as are more clinical words like “clitoris” and “vagina.” Saleswomen use nice-nellyisms

such as “button” for clitoris, “lilly” for vulva and/or vagina, and “unit” for penis. When discussing sexual intercourse or oral sex, they say “relations” or use a euphemism like “riding the train.”

Women ask questions, since they are usually among friends. Stories and critiques inadvertently get shared. For example, Farah begins the party by passing a large double dong (a 21-inch larger-than-life penis with heads at both ends) around the room. This “unit” gets passed from one person to the next throughout the party every time she says the word “unit.” (The last one holding it gets a free sex toy.) In explaining why this unit had a gash in it, Farah tells of causing that gash after she used the unit to stop a man who was flashing some women. The flasher had his little one out and so Farah took this giant one and started waving it at him threateningly. She then gashed it on her car window as she brought it back into her car. (At another party, the gash came about when she beat a man over the head with it at a gas station.)

### **The Tradition of In-Home Marketing to Women**

As Alison Clarke (1999) showed in *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, women have often found empowerment in the push to get them to buy ever more plastic items, even while those items are not necessities and cause women to focus on

their own individual lifestyles rather than their place in a sexist social order. In this section we outline the parallels between sextoy parties and Tupperware parties, highlighting the greater intimacy of the sex-toy party and thus its greater potential for both personal empowerment *and* capitalist exploitation of consumers.

The in-home party has been a popular marketing technique for decades, notably used for the sale of Tupperware and, more recently, Pampered Chef cooking products. Wearever Aluminum Cooking Products formally devised the hostess party in the 1920s. Madam C. J. Walker and Turbo Malone’s “agent-operator” distribution system of selling cosmetics to African American women was its precursor (Clarke, 1999: 82-85). Many companies saw that sociality around purchasing reduced consumer resistance and made products like cosmetics acceptable among women (Clarke, 1999: 86). Sex toys are the latest technologies that require an increase in product acceptance among still resistant consumers.

Sex-toy parties parallel Tupperware parties in several ways, and this parallel is not lost on women, who often refer to their sex-toy parties in code as “Tupperware parties.” Obviously, this coded

speech reveals the innocence of the Tupperware party when compared to the naughtiness of the sex-toy party, about which women feel they can't speak directly. Like Tupperware parties, sex-toy parties: are held by and for women in the tradition of in-home marketing; demonstrate technological artifacts to buy; push products that promise improved family lives for women; and employ highly tactile sales techniques in a fun, intimate atmosphere of female bonding. Since sex-toy parties sell artifacts for private pleasures, they foster an even greater sense of intimacy between the women—which has both positive and negative consequences for thinking critically about the commodification of sexuality, bodies, and lifestyles in our capitalist culture.

The Tupperware party plan system blurred the boundaries between domesticity and commerce, work and leisure, friend and colleague, consumer and employee (Clarke, 1999: 108). In-home sales to women involves informal networking on the part of the product dealer/saleswoman, who recruits potential party hostesses, who themselves receive a percentage of the evening's sales in free

products. The party hostess invites her friends for a party, serving food and drinks, for a fun social occasion designed to sell them products. At the sex-toy party we hosted, we were offered 10 percent of total party sales toward free products, and some bonus products.

Tupperware salespeople countered customer apathy and resistance with highly physical demonstration techniques, such as inviting consumers to “yank it, bang it, jump on it” (Clarke, 1999: 79). Tupperware parties set up a highly tactile, sensual atmosphere in which women were encouraged to handle the products (Clarke, 1999: 108). Sex-toy parties take this a step further by passing out scented lotions for women to rub on and smell, and body-heating cream women put on the insides of their wrists or elbows. The dealer passes around edible oils into which women dip their penis or bosom-shaped pen toppers and taste. (Each party guest is given a pen and an order form straight away, for noting what she wants to purchase throughout the party.) At some parties, the guests even giddily reached into their blouses to test the nipple-sensitizing drops.

If sex-toy dealers make their products alluring to customer-party guests, they do so within a long tradition of in-home marketing, wherein Tupperware dealers were trained to describe the artifacts they sold at Tupperware parties as enticing, the classic example being the “magic button” of the Tupperware sealing system. We chuckled when the “button” was referred to throughout the sex-toy parties, as in “rub this on your button to make it throb” and “this toy enters you while vibrating your button for two times the pleasure.”

The creation of a physical and active party atmosphere continues with Tupperware-party dealers' creation of games that break down the inhibitions and passivity of the guests. Significantly, many of these techniques allow women to bond through the exclusion or critique of men. For example, one Tupperware-party game called "Hubby" asked women to write hypothetical newspaper ads selling their unwanted husbands. One such ad read: "One husband for sale. Balding, often cranky, stomach requiring considerable attention!" (Clarke, 1999: 108).

**Figure 3**

**Photo of Dildo with Vibrating Beaver Attachment**



Sex-toy parties also celebrate feminine issues and perspectives through ice-breaking games and the cultivation of female space—both of which can involve critiquing men. One party dealer encouraged the guests to take the first letter of their name and find a word starting with that same letter to describe their partner in bed. Farah began: "My name is Farah and my husband is a flop." Everyone laughs, and is thereby given immediate permission to voice

their complaints about their own sex lives. This not only breaks the ice and celebrates women's critiques but also situates the purchase of sex toys in the context of getting something you currently lack (rather than of, say, being a hot sex goddess—a self-image few women have). Dealers tell stories that foster a special “girls-only” mood. For example, though one dealer explained that men are not

allowed in a home where a sex-toy party is taking place because of state laws that would equate her work with the solicitation of prostitution, another told the group that they used to allow guys at parties, but stopped when guys wouldn't quit saying things like, “what d'ya want this for, honey, when you got *this*” [lewd pointing gesture at crotch]. Rather than stroking the male ego, women can focus on their own pleasure. This exclusionary narrative conscientiously constructs the party as a safe space.<sup>2</sup>

As already evident, the creation of intimacy, proven to be key to Tupperware sales, is relatively easy to accomplish in sex-toy sales. Getting women to speak out about their desires is another way to foster intimacy among guests. One dealer, Krista (a pseudonym), told us to take the first letter of our name and tell the group a word describing what we want to do sexually. So as not to be intimidating, she started off with a particularly innocuous example: “My name is Krista and I want to kiss it.” Women gradually upped the ante and eventually were saying things like, “My name is Mindy and I want multiple orgasms” and “My name is Sasha and I want to suck it.” Showing comfort and intimate knowledge of products is another way dealers encourage women to let go of inhibitions during the party. Krista would stick out her tongue to indicate ecstasy over a particular artifact. Farah regularly gave gestural and vocal accents to hint at how great the products feel. A cream to rub on one's clitoris that makes it throb for three hours was touted as incredible, with Farah singing a song to indicate excitement at the mere thought of using the product. In case women wondered what the heck they'd do with a male partner whose sexual interest or performance cannot be sustained for three whole hours, she reminds the women that there are other products soon to be displayed that can help: “You can tell him to eat it for the first hour, ride the train for the second hour, and then tell him to leave while you have a date with BOB (the Battery-Operated Boyfriend, or vibrator) for the third hour!” (In this way, some products help sell others, just as Earl Tupper designed Tupperware displays to do [Clarke, 1999].)

Clearly, sex toys are portrayed as technologies of empowerment. That the sex-toy dealer is herself thus empowered and comfortable with sex helps sell the products—and what they promise. Being a



sex-toy product dealer is empowering. Just as Tupperware ladies found a source of income and empowerment through their work peddling the plastic bowls in women's homes, today's sex-toy dealers clearly find a route to personal satisfaction and self-efficacy in sex-toy sales. Farah told us that what she loves most about this job is all the different people she meets, and seeing where a party's atmosphere will go. But she also did not hesitate to mention her top ranking in company sales and the lovely prizes she'd received for having sold the most of a particular product in a given month or season. (Her company utilizes incentive schemes similar to those of Tupperware, Mary Kay Cosmetics, and other such companies.) At the same time, it's worth noting that Krista, whose two missing teeth divulge her class status, goes to work cleaning houses from about 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., after which most days she heads to a sex-toy party, finally getting home to her husband and kids at about midnight. After the party, she complained of her tiring workdays and nights, and expressed worries about how unsupervised her teenagers are because she's hardly ever home. In these moments, one sees the sex-positive, sex-focused attitude the dealers project as a thinly veiled marketing technique, and we wondered how much sex they actually have time or energy for. Sex toys are purchases women make to become better women, more fulfilled lovers, more empowered individuals; so it makes sense that the saleswomen would project that persona.

Clarke (1999) shows that Tupperware's appeal to 1950s women lay in its sleek, modern material and its promise of better living, which fit into larger socio-economic trends of post-war mass purchasing power and housewives as thrifty consumers. Tupperware resonated as an object of modernity particularly to middle-class women who were excluded from many forms of paid employment and consumption choices. Certainly the rise of sex-toy parties in the last decade has other sources. We situate the sale of sex toys to women in a multi-billion dollar sex industry which exploded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in a culture of general consumption of products designed for entertainment and life enhancement, and in what Anthony Giddens (1991) identifies as characteristically Western, late-modern "life politics." Precisely because of this cultural

milieu, sex-toy parties bring to a head a number of key debates in feminism about sexuality, technology, and consumer capitalism.

### **Sex Toys: Feminist Resistance or Capitalist Containment?**

While we hope that women's experimentation with sex toys and

discussions about sex with other women might heighten their expectations for sex and foster a critique of male-centered sexuality, we worry about the entrenched rhetoric of “romance,” and the increasing commodification of sexuality and lifestyles. Women attend sex-toy parties and use sex toys as part of an overall lifestyle project of pleasure and empowerment. Life politics can be distinguished from the “emancipation politics” that characterized, for example, the first and second waves of the feminist movement. Emancipation politics are political efforts in which groups attempt to overcome a structural form of oppression, or overcome the oppressive restrictions of traditional customs (Giddens, 1991: 214-215). Life politics, by contrast, “presumes (a certain level of) emancipation” and thus focuses more on life decisions, self-identity, and lifestyle (Giddens 1991: 214). Life politics often involve using one’s body to have a different kind of life (e.g., choosing a macrobiotic diet, becoming a bodybuilder, or getting cosmetic surgery). Life politics and their body projects are sometimes connected to larger political struggles. For instance, the macrobiotic person may connect with a social movement that challenges Western corporate agribusiness and its control of agriculture in developing countries. But life politics are often focused directly on the individual and their own body project, a damper on collective consciousness and social-movement activity.

In order to assess the political promise of sex-toy parties, it is useful to distinguish in-home sex-toy parties from conscientiously feminist sex-toy stores such as Good Vibrations and Toys in Babeland (in California and Seattle, respectively). Meika Loe’s (1998) study of a sex-toy store, Toy Box (a pseudonym), reveals the significance of a sex shop’s being feminist in its development, organizational style, and goals. Toy Box was created with the explicit mission of liberating women through more access to sexual

information and aids/machines, a rhetoric completely missing from the romance-enhancement companies that market through the inhome party plan. The Toy Box sex shop does not use euphemisms in their discussions of products. Indeed, this is part of what is feminist about the shop:

For Toy Box workers, new vocabulary words like clitoris, masturbation, and desire go hand-in-hand with a new comfort with, and permission to be, sexual agents. Not only does she provide an uncensored vocabulary, but the sexpert also models open, honest, sexual communication for those who have difficulty discussing sexuality. (Loe, 1998: 122)

Toy box also promotes sexual diversity, though in its infancy in the late 1970s refused to sell any dildos or vibrators that penetrated

on the grounds that those were phallogocentric, instead embracing the clitoris and the vibrators that served a clitoris-centered revision of sexuality (Loe, 1998: 113-14). Still, though, while the products Toy Box sold may have shifted in response to new trends in feminism, clearly Toy Box sells products only after careful consideration of the feminist critique or statement they make.

In these ways, feminist sex-toy shops—while as profit-motivated as in-home sex-toy sales companies—go further toward realizing a feminist critique of sexuality. However, the locations of feminist sex-toy shops—cities like San Francisco, New York, and Seattle—believe a greater tolerance for that critique. In more rural areas, both sex-toy shops and parties are bound to be more conservative. Though not explicitly trained to be feminist sexperts like the workers at Toy Box (Loe, 1998), sex-toy party saleswomen do see themselves as performing an educational and potentially empowering function. For instance, Farah told us about a young woman at a party who asked her if she could get AIDS from “sucking unit.” Farah explained, “I told her, ‘YES, honey, you can. Didn’t your parents talk to you about sex before you went away to college?’ And she said ‘no,’ so I gave her a bunch of flavored condoms at cost.” Clearly, in emphasizing that she gave these to the young woman without making a profit, Farah emphasized that a safer-sex educational mission can, at least some of the time, be more important to a dealer than making money. Farah told us about a college

student’s mother who, after receiving a credit card bill revealing that her daughter had purchased sex toys, placed an angry call to Farah. Farah said, “I simply asked the student’s mother, ‘Would you rather her have a toy or a boy?’ and she realized she didn’t want her daughter messing with boys.” After a slight pause, Farah asked, “Guess who booked a party? The girl’s mother! I drove across two states to give that party, too.” In this way, expanding people’s understandings of how women can have sex goes hand-in-hand with an implicit critique of the problems and consequences of sex with men. Party dealers offer this critique to women who might never have walked into a sex-toy store.

Party goers become exposed to sex toys without necessarily having the critique or the curiosity that might bring a woman into a sex-toy shop. At one party, for instance, one shy guest saw the anal beads and asked, “Can you *really* have *anal* sex? Have *you* ever had anal sex?” When she received two affirmative answers, she followed up those questions with a string of even more intimate ones. A woman at another party, who had a puzzled look on her face throughout the event, became emboldened enough to place a phone call to her husband at order time. She returned from the

group and said, with a shy grin on her face, “He said I could buy anything I want.” After a party in which several of the women purchased a battery-operated multi-speed pink vibrating dildo with a little rabbit on the outside whose ears stimulate the clitoris, the group of women continued a conversation at the office about the product and the orgasms they had with it, and two of the women who were late that day were quick to explain the toy’s influence on their tardiness. Clearly the party guests ended up with a new awareness about sex, their bodies, and of the power of nonmedicalized, woman-to-woman communication.

Sex-toy parties, then, can be a “safe space,” particularly for women who are not ready for a traditional feminist consciousnessraising group. Further, they can propel women into more conversations and practices, which themselves may reverberate into the many social settings in which women find themselves. Thus sex-toy parties have a radical potential of expanding women’s critical consciousness of sexual culture. However, such parties do have their

limitations precisely because they are not guided by feminist principles. For instance, some parties do not mention or sell strap-on vibrating dildos. Farah never offered the bosom-shaped pen toppers, (although Krista did). It’s as though companies and/or their dealers presume all women have male partners—and male partners who do not want to be penetrated—or as though keeping the “clean” image of sex toys involves pretending women use them only with men or when alone. Despite this heterocentrist bias, however, one dealer switched her rhetoric as soon as a party guest pointed out the possibility of using a toy with another woman. Also, the underlying expectation that a woman has a partner was challenged at one party when, during the introductory name game one guest said, “My name is Maureen and I don’t have a partner so I guess I’ll say ‘masturbation.’” Clearly, women aren’t necessarily led by the representative’s biases, but make room for their own lifestyles and political views to be heard. Dealer bias impacts the party’s political atmosphere, of course, but this does not mean we should assume that guests come to the party without bias, waiting to be filled with a stranger’s agenda.

We may be comfortable at this point with the idea that although problematic, the space created by sex-toy parties can and does allow for a critique of male-centered sexuality. In this space, a pleasure project for women is also allowed for and fostered: an orgasm project. Vibrators and other sex toys constitute the technological route to a self-reflexive body project of female orgasm. Orgasm became a political issue in the context of the 1970s feminist movement, inasmuch as the personal was political and women realized

that intimate relationships with men bore all the marks of male arrogance and privilege. The female orgasm does not have direct bearing on male pleasure or conception—the two things that Rachel Maines (2000: 117) reminds us have had an understood, naturalized importance historically. Therefore, since the female body's presence, and not her orgasm's presence, is all that is necessary for the couple's procreation and the man's recreation, women have not enjoyed, until recently in our history, even a proper claim to orgasmic experience. Female orgasm and even vibrators for their achievement were used by (male) doctors in a highly medicalized context

because of this very devaluing of female orgasm and sexual pleasure (Maines, 2000). Stimulating women to orgasm has been, as Maines (2000) put it, "the job nobody wanted." The body project of female orgasm and pleasure made possible (or at least relatively easier) through technical devices sold at female-only sex-toy parties promises women the fulfillment and empowerment, now widely (at least superficially) acknowledged as something women deserve, in what is now widely acknowledged to be a disappointingly malecentered arena of sexual relations.

Can this orgasm body project—achieved primarily through an individualistic, capitalistic consumption model—offer a critique of normative discourses of heterosexual sex and identity? The party's atmosphere may create a safe space for a critique of the heterosexual dynamic, as we have seen, but what if that space is colonized by capitalist agendas that converge in an individualistic orgasm project? We suggest that such a project can still generate change, but may just as easily prevent women from a broader critique. Since technologies and the body projects they support can either disrupt or reinforce normative discourses of the gendered body, we ask whether the context of consumer capitalism fuels or thwarts the potential of feminist critique of male-centered sexuality (which is one reason women need vibrators in the first place). Put another way, how much Tupperware or how many sex toys does a woman really need to buy, before she's been bought?

Giddens (1991: 196-197) notes that one dilemma of life-political projects involves the commodification of experience in a capitalistic market. Advertisers, for instance, "foster specific consumption 'packages,'" wherein "the consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of self" (Giddens, 1991: 198). Thus sex toys promise an empowering body project leading to self-development, and are packaged and sold as such. "Not just lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria" (Giddens, 1991: 198). Teresa Ebert's analysis of "ludic feminism" challenges feminists to

think more critically about the body- and pleasure-projects they champion as radical or destabilizing, precisely because those projects fail to criticize the commodification inherent in them.

In her critique of feminists who emphasize the body, pleasure, and subversion, Ebert (1995: 234) argues that feminism divorced the body from an important materialist analysis: “The body, corporeality, in short, is the new site of an ever-more-localized and localizing autonomous knowledge cut off from the social relations of production.” Ebert asks us to consider the complicity that exists between such “ludic corporeality” and capitalism. In Ebert’s (1996: 250) terms, we might ask: Do sex toys bring women emancipatory knowledge and the potential for cultural subversion or are they merely personally subversive pleasures? Ebert’s critique of ludic feminism is based on the assumption that only emancipatory knowledge can “generate the new subjectivities necessary to transform the world” (Ebert, 1996: 250). But this equation may be too simplistic. After all, subversive pleasures can generate new subjectivities, and new subjectivities do not always change the world. How effective is that stubborn insistence to live the revolution constantly (boycotting men or penetrative sex a la Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*); when in fact sexuality is so intimate and complicated that embracing for women a space to explore and seek pleasure—whether or not it leads to revolution—can itself be a worthy goal politically. So while Ebert’s position is important for interrogating ludic pleasures in their context of consumption packages of pleasure or empowerment, it is equally important to acknowledge that there is no space outside of power relations where we can realize an objective, free, nonpatriarchal, noncapitalist sexuality.

Some technological products (which are, of course, for sale in the capitalist marketplace) can and have symbolized feminist consciousness and social change. Consider the speculum of the 1970s and the dildo today. Loe (1998: 98) states optimistically: “If the speculum served as an icon of women’s claiming their bodies in the 1970s, in the hi-tech 80s and 90s, and into the next century, women’s symbol of independence and pleasure is the vibrator, the recommended instrument for Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ woman.” Haraway (1991), however, is the first to say that such technical symbols for women’s empowerment ignore a whole host of technoscientific transformations that perpetuate inequality if we do not pay attention to them. Feminists’ embrace of the speculum in

the 1970s as liberatory technology, in other words, was too simplistic and idealistic. Haraway (1991) argues that such self-help is not enough.

As Giddens (1991) notes, self-help narratives are sold in the lifepolitical context of self-actualisation. In the case of sex toys, such self-help may serve only as a band-aid for a male-centered sexual world. The self-help narrative of the sex-toy party is that women will be liberated if they simply expect less from men and learn to satisfy themselves. Rhetoric at such toy parties assumes that men won't change; technology will enable women to work with or around men. For instance, sex-toy parties assume that a woman's male partner will lose interest in sex after he climaxes and hence BOB is presented as what a woman can do in the "third hour" after the man orgasms. Why does the woman's sexual pleasure have to serve only as rising action to the man's, allowing him a good long curtain close while she's still on stage? (French, 2000). Thus the discourse surrounding sex toys must go beyond self-help, which may not happen until women at sex-toy parties and more conscientiously feminist dealers demand and/or offer products and rhetorics that destabilize the gender essentialism behind the phallogentric, heterosexist model of who's going to have an orgasm how and when (for example, by displaying and selling a strap-on dildo that women could use with male or female partners). In this sense the discourse of the sex-toy party extends the therapeutic self-help narrative about women's liberation.

However, as Terri Kapsalis (1997: 168) points out, "while selfhelp may not be enough, given the female cyborg's continual negotiation with new technologies, it may still be a place to start." Similarly, the vibrator cannot become *the* symbol of feminist liberation from male-centered sexuality; but surely sex toys can provide a *possibility* of self-sexing that, as Kapsalis (1997: 170) argues for the speculum, "may precede and even lead to learning." Perhaps sex toys could be, as Kapsalis argues for the speculum and cervical self-exam, about larger issues than simply investigating one's own body. Instead it could be about imagining a new kind of female body and new kind of sexuality, thereby reconfiguring issues of power and control (Kapsalis, 1997: 171). Certainly we'd

encourage other researchers to investigate the meaning and impact of sex toys in women's lives. For now, we suggest, again as Kapsalis did with regard to the significance and symbolism of the speculum, that such technologies have limits but nevertheless serve as powerful practical tools that offer at least the potential for re-envisioning gender and sexuality.

Kapsalis insists upon the potential of making public the privatized experiences of women's bodies and sexuality. For example, Kapsalis (1997: 113-133) reads porn star and performance artist Annie Sprinkle's on-stage "Public Cervix Announcement" as delightfully

disrupting the medicalized distancing of women from their bodies. Sex-toy parties can serve as a similar stage on which women can make public their private problems and desires. After all, women get together in groups to review sex toys and discuss their use and pleasures. On the other hand, one could argue that the in-home party plan for sex-toy sales presupposes the need to maintain privacy around sexuality. For instance, party guests do pay for and receive products in a private room with the dealer at the end of the party. They take their items home in little paper bags. In this sense, sex-toy stores are quintessentially public in a way that in-home sex-toy parties are relatively private. Then again, someone can enter a sex-toy store and retain a certain anonymity while one cannot be anonymous at a sex-toy party. Further, some women do share information about their purchases and use of toys at the parties. This, of course, depends on the dynamics of the party as well as the individuals attending.

Even while we are critical of the commodification of women's techno body project of orgasm, and the way in which sex toys are sold to women without a real critique of heterosexist patriarchal sexuality, we must still acknowledge that women interpret the commodification all around them. Women's pleasure, and the orgasm project that sex toys enable and encourage, may not inevitably provide a large-scale cultural critique, due to their intimate nature, the stubbornly ingrained heterosexist dynamic, and the commodification of lifestyles that the orgasm project and sex-toy purchases are imbedded within, but they *are* a possible route to an increased sense of female entitlement and an expansion of narrowly

heterosexist pleasures. Pleasure is yet another commodity in late capitalism, but it's also worth having nonetheless. Pleasure is politically complex, which makes us hopeful that it could serve as a vehicle toward the critiques begun in the second wave of the feminist movement.

## Notes

1. While Farah acknowledged that her parties sometimes involve out lesbians, the discourse of her company is overwhelmingly heterosexual and the products are sold to women with their having male partners in mind.

2. The power of the women-only space created in these events, and their focus on female sexuality, is not lost on the male partners of the women who attend. For example, recently our male colleagues planned a "guns and cigars party" as a direct response to a sex-toy party the women were attending. They circulated the following tongue-in-cheek e-mail message among men:

In response to the increasingly popular all-female Sex Toy Party being held this Saturday night, I would like to invite all my male



friends and colleagues (No girls allowed!) out for the official, onceper-year, Cigar 'n' Guns Party! We could begin the evening over cigars at the tobacco shop across from Sam's restaurant maybe around 6:30 on Saturday, then go from there. Options for the remainder of the evening include but are not limited to: scratching ourselves while leering at women; sucking down Pabst Blue Ribbons while shooting pool under smoky incandescent lighting to bad dance tunes at the bar; exchanging hunting/gun/sexual-conquest stories while discussing the fucking genius of Neil Pert, Tom Waits or the Jon Spencer blues explosion at the sports bar while some football-like sport unfolds its drama on the TV screen in the background.

3. In Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, in order to protest the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian women go on a sex strike until their husbands make peace.

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