

*Abstract* This article addresses the material construction of female heterosexuality through examination of the mass marketing of women's pornography – 'erotic fiction for women by women' as exemplified by Virgin Publishing's Black Lace imprint. Focusing on the gendered construction of sexuality in popular fictions, I explore the pleasures of consumption offered to women by explicitly 'pornographic' texts and consider how the shift into a culture of 'post-feminism' alters the terms upon which a politics of 'reading sex' might be made. The article considers how appropriate feminist analyses of pornography are to account for contemporary manifestations of the post-feminist pleasure of consuming the 'feminine' and questions what kind of cultural space is provided by the fictions. In view of a concern to relate mass fictional forms to their discursive placement, I am interested in the ways in which the Virgin imprint produces written erotica as a site of 'empowerment' and of 'liberation' for women. This is located within current modalities of post-feminist identity in which sexual pleasure and commodity forms are inextricably tied to notions of 'entitlement' and consumerist 'self-determination'.

*Keywords* commodification, erotica, feminism, popular fiction, post-feminism

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## 'Erotic Fiction by Women for Women': The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality

... our current sexual politics can no longer be that begun by Kate Millet and continued by anti-pornography feminists. This politics of condemning the masculine 'other' feeds all too easily into the condemnation of the deviant sexualities of 'perverse others'. Now that these perverse others take their place, not simply as freak contrasts to a dominant norm, but as authoritative subjectivities, both explicit and erotic, on the scene of sexual representation, the anti-pornography feminist reification of vilified masculinity backfires as a strategy for the furtherance of feminist goals. (Williams, 1993: 59)

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The classic narrative trope of the ‘voyage of discovery’ began for me on a wet Tuesday in a small English seaside town in October 1997 when I entered a Volume One bookstore with a view to researching an article on post-feminism and contemporary romance fiction. Passing through the familiar displays of film/television tie-ins and popular genres of sci-fi, ‘sword and sorcery’ fantasy, horror, war, crime, detective and romance fiction, I was curious to find an erotic fiction section barely distinguished, in commercial layout and presentation, from its more ‘mainstream’ surroundings. Of a range of erotic fictions displayed – New English Library’s ‘Interlover’ and Headline/Delta’s ‘Liaison’ series, selected titles from Nexus, X-Libris and ‘Hard Candy’ from Masquerade Books (Harlequin) – I was drawn chiefly to a series entitled Black Lace that seemed to me to owe much to the fictional formats and marketing of mass romance fiction. The selection was split equally between a ‘historical’ series and a ‘contemporary’ series. Utilizing fictional historical settings, ranging through Ancient Egypt, Restoration England, American Frontier, St Petersburg 1788 and 1920s flapper culture, were novels such as *Western Star* (Roxanne Carr, 1995):

It’s 1851 . . . Maribel had sure grown up since the last wagon train headed west. In fact her sexuality was getting out of control. . . . Maribel’s campaign to seduce Dan during the two thousand-mile trek is interrupted by her dalliance with a captain of the US cavalry who appreciates her skill with her whip and lariat . . . . (back cover blurb)

*The Hand of Amun* (Juliet Hastings, 1997):

Naunakhte lay very still. Dragged from everything she knew into a strange and erotic place, she was uncertain of what she should say or do. The high priestess of the god parted her thighs and prepared to make an arcane trial of her chastity. (back cover blurb)

And *Dance of Obsession* (Olivia Christie, 1996):

Paris, 1935. The business is Fleur’s – an exclusive club where women of means can indulge their sexual whims with men of their choice and take advantage of the esoteric delights Parisian nightlife has to offer. (back cover blurb)

Beside these, the ‘contemporary’ locate their recognizably ‘romantic’ narratives within topical scenarios. These include Sarah Fisher’s (1996) *A Private Collection*:

Behind an overgrown garden by the sea, a crumbling mansion harbours a tantalising secret: a remarkable collection of priceless erotica belonging to a fading society beauty and her inscrutable chauffeur. When writer Francesca Leeman is commissioned to catalogue the collection, she finds herself becoming embroiled in a three-way game of voyeurism and mystery. (back cover blurb)

*Deborah's Discovery* by Fredrica Alleyn (1995):

Deborah Woods is trying to change her life. Having just ended her long-term relationship and handed her notice in at work, she is ready for a little adventure. Meeting oil magnate John Pavin II throws her world into even more confusion as he invites her to stay at his luxurious renovated castle in Scotland. But what looked like being a romantic holiday soon turns into a test of sexual bravery. (back cover blurb)

Or *Wicked Work* (Pamela Kyle, 1996):

At twenty-eight, Suzie Carlton is at the height of her journalistic career. She has status, money and power. What she doesn't have is a masterful partner who will allow her to realise the true extent of her fantasies. How will she reconcile the demands of her job with her sexual needs? (back cover blurb)

Yet while the Black Lace series conforms to the established generic conventions of mass romance, its primary *raison d'être* as erotica situates it firmly within the highly lucrative contemporary mass market for sexually explicit novels. Indeed, the series launched Virgin Publishing into this market in July 1993. Selling two million copies of a hundred different titles in a global market extending to the US, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa and with foreign rights sold to 16 countries in Europe as well as China, Virgin's erotica imprint professes to sell more copies than all other erotic fiction combined. But if the series' proximity to the formal conventions of romantic fiction, then, initially signalled its similarity to pre-existing commercial narrative formulae for female-addressed fiction, Black Lace fictions are fundamentally differentiated within the wider publishing market for written erotica.

Deliberately set against the historical and cultural domination of pornography 'for men by men', each title comes with the promise that it has been written by a female author – 'erotic fiction by women for women'. It is this claim to provide a *woman*-defined space for the enjoyment of sexually explicit material that I want to examine here as a complex contemporary manifestation of fundamental shifts in both the positioning and meaning of written erotica in the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Broadly approached, pornography of the kind typified by Black Lace is a popular fictional form located within a general cultural context which acknowledges that a feminist analysis of women's relationship to sexually explicit materials must make women's consumption of erotica at least problematic. But this must be historically contextualized by David Evans' observation that while still 'severely proscribed by femininity [. . .] female sexuality has nevertheless become active, recreational, material, independent, consumerist and consumed, a key site of conflict, resistance and division' (Evans, 1993: 41). In this context, I would suggest that the emergence of Black Lace is better understood within contemporary 'post-feminist' constructions of female

heterosexuality in which the pleasures offered to the female readership embody contradictions around sexual pleasure and female desire that refuse to be easily positioned against pro- or anti-pornography politics.

## Post-feminism and popular pleasure

Post-feminist thinking during the 1990s has developed two distinct trends of thought relevant here. The simplest definition suggests that feminism has achieved its major goals and become irrelevant to the lives of young women today. The 'post' therefore signifies a 'going beyond' or moving on from feminism, with the implicit assumption that its critiques and demands have been accommodated and absorbed far enough to permit 'return' to pre-feminist pleasures now transformed in meaning by a feminist consciousness. Accordingly, popular culture since the 1980s has produced Madonna, Tank Girl, 'cyber-babe' Lara Croft, the Girlie Show and the Spice Girls as evidence of new models for female identity, personal agency and sexual display.<sup>2</sup> With this reading, Black Lace fictions assert the existence of a 'New Woman' of the 1990s – distinguished from all other versions of the New Woman by a cultural climate in which women can now be traditionally 'feminine' and sexual in a manner utterly different in meaning from either pre-feminist or non-feminist versions demanded by phallogcentrically defined female heterosexuality. The current post-feminist 'return' to feminine pleasures (to dress, cosmetics, visual display, to Wonderbra 'sexiness') is 'different' because, it is suggested, it takes place within a social context fundamentally altered by the achievement of feminist goals. The emergence of erotic fiction specifically for women can be located as part of this wider process through which a new female heterosexual identity is articulated around the active consumption of erotica. If it is feminism that enabled women to do the political work necessary to explore new modes of female sexuality outside of patriarchal givens, it is post-feminism which reclaims for women the 'illicit' pleasures of pornography.

A second version of post-feminism, more closely influenced by post-structuralist dissolution of feminism's reliance on 'identity politics', is underpinned by a narrative that casts post-feminist concern for 'difference' (race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age and nationality) as a *liberation* from Second Wave feminism retrospectively constructed as a monolithic, homogeneous, puritanical and sometimes tyrannical discourse. Biddy Martin neatly encapsulates this in identifying post-feminism in 'polemical and ultimately reductionist accounts of the varieties of feminist approaches to just one feminism, guilty of the humanist trap of making a self-same, universal category of "women" – defined as other than men – the subject of feminism. At its worst, feminism has been seen as more punitively policing than mainstream culture' (Martin, 1998: 12).

Taking both strands of post-feminism together, regardless of their legitimacy, would suggest a need to re-conceptualize the terms upon which a feminist-informed reading of commercial pornography for women might be made. Specifically, the post-feminism of the Black Lace texts can be found in their contradictory relationship to feminism's politicization of heterosexual pleasure. Viewed in this way, Black Lace fictions are revealing as popular cultural representations of historical shifts in discourses around feminism and female sexuality. I would suggest that those shifts centre on the re-positioning of commodified pornography to align with current notions of post-feminist women's 'personal empowerment' and of sexual pleasure as a form of capitalist consumer 'entitlement'.

While I am hugely sceptical about these claims, the terms of intervention in the mass popular women's fiction market are especially significant for a feminist reading of current notions on the relationship between women, politics and sexuality. Michel Foucault's oft-invoked notion of sexuality as *discourse* might fruitfully be applied here to explain how Black Lace situates its claims to be a new discourse of female pleasure (Foucault, 1979, 1988). Taking 'discourse' in Foucault's sense of bringing together power, knowledge *and* pleasure, I am concerned to identify the ways in which a commercial press proffers to 'reinvent' female sexuality within a historically unprecedented conjunction of consumerist commodity consumption. In particular, I want to suggest that the ways in which a capitalist mass market press invokes discourses around female sexuality, feminism and the pleasures of reading sex in order to imbricate both 'power' and 'knowledge' in a specific formation of contemporary (hetero)sexuality rest, above all, upon a conception of the post-feminist female reader as self-empowered *consumer*.

To begin this, I want to offer a necessarily cursory consideration of earlier feminist engagement with the politics of female sexual pleasure in order to establish the contradictions that a mass-marketed publishing house attempts to mediate with the 'newly' empowered female readership of Black Lace.

## Feminism and sexual pleasure

It is worth reiterating the debates raised in Carol S. Vance's important essay (originally published in 1984) 'More Danger, More Pleasure: A Decade After the Barnard Sexuality Conference' (1992). Here she presents a historical review of Second Wave feminism's troubled relation with women's sexuality in male-dominated culture. Vance suggests that early feminists conceived of a politics that would address questions of female sexuality simultaneously on two fronts. Firstly, a negative critique of the material social conditions which connected women's experience of sexuality with

fear and powerlessness. Secondly, a positive revisioning of an autonomous female sexuality freed from sexist cultural constructions. The first front took female sexuality as the locus of unequal heterosexual power relations: lack of control over reproduction, domestic violence, coercive incest, rape, violation, sexual harassment and humiliation, and restricted personal freedom to walk the streets. Vance argues that alongside these interventions, possibilities for creating new ways of conceiving of female sexual pleasure outside of the cultural orthodoxies of male-defined phallogentric sex formed an important part of an emergent discourse of women's right to sexual self-determination. But in challenging western patriarchal values which demanded that women accede to a sexualized female identity (which at the same time rendered them objects of exploitation, hostility and attack), politicization of female sexuality has rendered women's sexual pleasure, rather than women's sexual danger, a particularly thorny issue for feminist politics. More specifically, debate on the 'dangers' of sexuality has itself been largely conducted around *visual* pornography which has come to hold a privileged place as the 'central engine of women's oppression, the major socialiser of men and the chief agent of violence against women' (Vance, 1992: xix).

A major part of the challenge to the ideological construction of female sexuality as both mirror and servant of patriarchal needs and desires has centred on the role of pornography in constructing and maintaining male oppression of women through their sexualization. However, Vance asserts that the *positive* project of investigating what women's pleasures and desires might be if freed to 'act in ways that give them sexual pleasure in a society that would nurture and protect their delights' (Vance, 1992: xvi) has been submerged by a concentration on the 'danger' of pornography for women. Vance argues for a continuation of explorations on the second front – of how women's experience of sexuality might be disconnected from the givens of patriarchal oppression. It is not possible to do justice to the complexity of argument on either side of what has rather narrowly become the pro- and anti-pornography debate.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say here that the terms upon which women can negotiate an autonomously defined sexuality in relationship to *conventional* representations of sexual fantasy have been profoundly conflicting. The question raised therefore is whether women can renegotiate the terms upon which western erotica has functioned – are women able to use erotica as part of a feminist project of exploring independent sexual subjectivity? Or must women's use of pornographic fantasy fiction always be compromised by the traditional power relations held to structure male-defined pornography? To approach some responses to this question, it is important to identify ways in which Black Lace as a publishing event is framed specifically in terms of *feminist* intervention.

*Pornography as feminism*

Having become intrigued by the emergence of the Black Lace series, I approached Virgin Publishing with a view to discussing the rationale for its appearance. Even at a general level, my interview with the Series Editor Kerri Sharp was conducted with full awareness of feminist thinking on the complexity of legitimating sexual fantasy spaces for women. Sharp's publishing career began after her academic interest in female sexuality led her to consider the historical forces which have denied women equal access to sexual fantasy material; her explicit understanding of the importance of Black Lace is that it has 'taken erotic publishing out of the hands of the sleazy porn merchants and made it available in every high street in Britain [. . .] Only in this century has female sexual desire been gradually rediscovered. And now, as in many other areas of life, women expect to be treated on the same terms as men' (*Black Lace Newsletter* No. 1, February 1997). Broadly defined, the publishing rationale is a response to a perceived need for equalizing power relations for women in the sphere of pornography. Black Lace, then, expresses feminist aims: I want to note three ways in which those aims are articulated through discourses around female authorship; the reader's right to pleasure; and 'healthy' female sexuality.

*Authorship and the everyday* Firstly, the fictions are framed as directly issuing out of feminist claims for women to be able to 'speak' sex in an authentic or non-colonized fashion. To do this, a language of 'female authenticity' is deployed with regard to notions of origination and authorship: the texts are sold on the pledge that the fictions are written for women only *by* women:

Women like the fact that these books have been written and packaged specifically for them. Black Lace is written by women, from the female point of view, and with women's desires and tastes in mind. (Publicity review of readers' response)

These are, then, resolutely separatist women-only spaces. But while the intention to provide a wholly women-centred contract between publisher, author and reader sits well with the radical feminist technique of making alternative spaces outside of patriarchal traditions and practices, I would want to question what is at work in constructing erotica for and by 'women only'.

The series' publicity material includes a biography for each author detailing her lifestyle and writing philosophy. Fredrica Alleyn (author of seven titles including *Cassandra's Conflict*, *Dark Obsession* and *Deborah's Discovery*) believes that 'erotic fiction as a genre is an exciting and free area for women writers': 'At last women have the freedom to openly admit their

sexual fantasies and read books based on female fantasies rather than male ones'. Juliet Hastings (author of five titles including *White Rose Ensnared*; *Forbidden Crusade*; and *The Hand of Amun*) thinks that writing for Black Lace is 'the most erotic thing I can do on my own' while for Sarah Hope-Walker (author of *The Gift of Shame*; and *Unfinished Business*) 'writing erotica is no big deal [. . .] She considers sex to be as important as eating and sleeping and feels that until recently society has been educated to regard it as something that is dirty'. The great significance attached to the authorship of each title, then, is inseparable from the question of gender – it is *women* who are claiming the political and social position from which to produce erotica for other women and the sense of challenging cultural taboos, of transgressing known parameters, is strongly conveyed through the idea that, for women, engaging with erotica at all is a bold and independent act of self-will. However, if women openly enjoying the writing of erotica is one of the fruits of feminist demands for equality in all spheres of cultural life, it is curious to find that the author's biographies are carefully constructed so that an interest in erotic literature is balanced by 'healthy' interests such as 'walking her two dogs and swimming' (Fredrica Alleyn) or 'singing (she is a proficient soprano), and her husband, Jonathon' (Juliet Hastings). The bravery of these pioneers is, then, somewhat undercut by their location in the realm of the everyday: the effect is to *reassure* the readership that they will only be taken to places in sexual fantasy to which ordinary women with ordinary needs and desires would want to go.

Such a reading is further reinforced if the emphasis on the female-authoredness of the texts is taken as a form of guarantee that the content will not work against the interests of the readership. There is in this an awareness of anti-pornography feminist analysis that so fervently asserts a deep connection between consumption of pornography and subconscious sexual corruption. Robin Morgan's tenet that 'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' has, as several commentators have remarked, a much wider cultural currency than parochial debates within feminism largely because of the way in which it fits so easily with New Right, pro-family, pro-censorship politics.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the femaleness of the author works to safeguard women readers: any suspicion that women might be unwittingly exploited or degraded by consuming erotica (if written by men) is alleviated by a female author. Black Lace poses itself as a new alternative where previously women's use of pornography would bring with it the bad conscience of being complicit in the objectification of other women: regardless of the content of the fictions, the series announces itself as a 'safe' space for a constructive revisioning of pornography for women readers. In this sense, Black Lace situates itself as part of what it claims is a historically unprecedented process of decolonization: challenging male-centred cultural practices by



decolonizing the language of sex to stake out the territory of 'authentic' female desire. Kerri Sharp's editorial instructions to new writers make it explicit that 'erotic fiction for women by women' must make its way against an inherited tradition of written male pornography. That only a *female* author is able to accomplish this testifies to the tenacity of the notion that it is the author of a text who is responsible for its meanings. While most contemporary theories of reading have long dispensed with such intentionalism, it is interesting to see the use to which an essentialist 'female authenticity' is put here: the connection between female authorship, authorial intention, the kind of specifically 'feminine' sexual fantasies produced and the meanings of those fantasies for the readership assumes that there is an untroubled passage of meaning and understanding between women simply by the fact of being women.

*Sexual pleasure and feminist entitlement* A second way in which the Black Lace series is embedded in the discourses of feminism is through its use of a language of *entitlement*. Given the historically myriad forms of radical critique that feminist politics have made, it is always more than a little disappointing to be confirmed in the view that it is liberal feminism which has found most fertile ground in western countries because of its compatibility with individualist ideologies of self and society. Feminism of a high liberalist variety is predicated on the rights of the *individual* woman and is largely exhausted by critiques of public institutions in perpetuating social inequality (law, education, employment). Liberalism appeals to the 'rights' of the individual and liberal feminism seeks to challenge institutional sexism but has traditionally left the private sphere outside of politics. However, the last two decades have seen a shift of liberal feminist assumptions around 'entitlement' to the domain of relationships, sexuality and to personal fulfilment through sexual pleasure. Black Lace expresses a form of individualistic feminism of the *Cosmopolitan* variety which fits easily with a view of sexuality in which women can make 'demands' for what is their birthright: equal sexual gratification. If the linchpin of liberalism is its appeal to reason, then who could possibly refuse the logic of women wanting to take their 'rightful' place alongside those men who have debarred them from their personal fantasies and thus from sexual fulfilment in erotica? As a pro-pornography position, this is actually quite compelling; what it fails to provide is any analysis that connects the power relations enacted in male-defined pornography to the broader continuum of male-dominated culture. In other words, without some consideration of whether and in what ways pornography is currently related to sexist structures in society, the simple assertion of women's 'right' to consume erotica splits pornography from the social conditions which feminists have fought hard to establish necessarily locates it within politics.

Further, while one assumes that the politics of entitlement to read erotica is staked against *male* control of women's access to porn, it is interesting that several authors pose their work against the strictures of Political Correctness they find inhibiting. It does not need much interpretation to recognize the target here is anti-pornography feminism though this also subsumes any version of feminism that wishes to politicize sexual representation. It seems that the *frisson* of readers' pleasure is thus increased if this pleasure is bought at the cost of Political Correctness. In other words, the logic of the position declares that 'it is alright to read erotica even if the anti-pornography feminists wouldn't like it. In fact it is more fun to read erotica *because* the anti-pornography feminist wouldn't like it'. The readership of Black Lace fictions, then, is addressed as consumers for whom written erotica is a site of pleasure and play, not of politics. This is a clear indication of a 'post-feminist' position that equates old-style feminism with prohibition of heterosexual enjoyment and repression of heterosexual pleasure. It is a position which taps into current perceptions (justified or not) that feminist politicization of heterosexual desire has marginalized questions of delight and sexual pleasure, that is a power discourse which is both puritanical and anti-pleasure. Hence the 'naughty but nice' effect where disapproval from Big Sister intensifies the secret/guilty pleasures offered to the 'post-feminist' consumer of the forbidden pleasures of the unreconstructed 'feminine'.

**Pornography as liberation** The third association made between Black Lace erotica and the language of feminism that I want to address relates to the Editor's quite categorical statement that the series is framed by a feminist intent to open access to an area of human experience previously denied to women. In this sense, Black Lace is quite contrary to the usual correlation between mass market fictions, patriarchal ideology and 'false consciousness' assumed to govern the meaning of the romance.<sup>5</sup> Instead, consumption of popular fiction is given to be a liberating experience, an experience that immediately proposes access to a less repressed female identity through gratification in sexual fantasy. Thus a liberal feminist sense of entitlement is combined with a Freudian conception of sexuality as a 'natural' and 'healthy' dimension of human selfhood: this results in a persuasive argument for buying Black Lace. Black Lace presents sexuality as a site of liberation for women, a space in which individual gratification is almost a duty since consuming erotic fictions will make readers more psychically healthy by being more closely aligned with their 'innermost' and until recently literally unspeakable desires. What this most lucidly signifies is how adept capitalist commodity markets have become at appropriating the language of freedom and the political project of feminism to market products.

Appropriating Foucault's theory that power, knowledge and pleasure come to form the discourse of sexuality in the course of the 20th century, it becomes clear why Black Lace espouses the Freudian model which places sexuality at the 'heart' and defines the 'truth' of one's self. Foucault suggests that it is functional for the operation of power that sexuality is seen as something *repressed* by social constriction for this implies the possibility of its revelation. Ignoring the gendered pronouns of the following, Foucault suggests:

There may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker's benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (Foucault, 1979: 6)

In the economic circuit of commodities in which Black Lace is located, the claim to know the 'truth' of sex for women can be converted into hard capitalist cash from those seeking to know: it is Virgin Publishing which accrues the 'speaker's benefit' of fulfilling the need to 'know'.

This is part of a wider late-20th-century process by which dominant culture has begun to trade upon 'transgression' as cultural capital. The economies structured around the pink and lavender pounds are also symptomatic of social shifts in which once 'alternative' political/sexual identities have become accommodated through commercialization. The emergence of new 'bodice ripper' imprints to cater for gay and lesbian as well as post-feminist heterosexual readerships testifies to the power of capitalist commodification to co-opt sexual lifestyles for niche marketing and product differentiation. Hence Virgin's new gay list named 'Idol' works under the same rubric as Black Lace: 'Homoerotic Fiction by Men for Men'. That the net effect of such processes is the facilitation of a wider acceptance of sexually 'deviant' identities by mainstream heterosociety is not at issue here. Rather, all forms of mass-marketed pornography attest to social changes in which sexual citizenship has become a profitable basis for the construction of readerships: sexuality has become inextricable from consumption – if our 'sexual identities are our imperative, inescapable and the deepest reality with which it is our duty to come to terms', then 'we must come to terms not only with sexuality as bio-political acts, drives, dysfunctions, "the Big 'O'", health, pleasure and happiness, but also with sexuality as commodities' (Evans, 1993: 45). The act of women purchasing and reading mass market written erotica can be viewed as the most heightened manifestation of the more generalized and dispersed 'logic' of

desire-driven consumer culture since the 'pursuit of the commodified self is the pursuit of the sexual self; individual, private, innermost, accomplished through the acquisition and conspicuous manifestations of style' (Evans, 1993: 45). In this sense, the Black Lace series is significant for the ways in which boundaries between the 'personal' and 'public' sexual self are produced in the late 20th century commodity form:

The material construction of sexualities within consumerism lies at the very heart of the modern era's instrumental self-interest for whilst consumption and sexual identity and expression are pursued in public, both their objectives remain resolutely fetishized as 'personal' and 'private'. (Evans, 1993: 45)

Evans argues that the articulation of a 'private' domain is as crucial for the formation of sexual identities as the public spaces of work and production. The discourse of sexuality offered as 'private' pleasure, as the individual's 'self-fulfilment' and as 'immediate gratification' obscures recognition that these terms are themselves produced as 'fetishized consequences of consumerist alienation' (Evans, 1993: 46). The Black Lace reader is thus locked into a circuit of desire and consumption which veils the commodity object with the libidinal pleasure of the *self-defined* sexual citizen. I want now to bring this view to bear on the more specifically focused issues of female readership, sexual pleasure and mass fictional form.

In the Editor's Response to the questionnaires returned about the fictions, the female readership is defined by employment and age: 'Accounts Admin in her twenties', 'Bank Clerk in her forties', 'PR Executive in her twenties' and 'Journalist in her twenties'. As the age group is limited, the Ideal Reader emerges as a white-collar professional 20–40-year-old woman presumably with enough disposable income regularly to pay £4.99 for each new title. Beyond individual pleasure, then, the newly empowered reader of Black Lace utilizes a commodified form of popular culture to signal alignment with a collective identity which exists only through that form. By connecting women in a shared fantasy world, the Black Lace philosophy mobilizes a rhetoric of community and collective female identity created around sexual fantasy. Consumption of erotica, then, works to reinforce the cultural identity of post-feminist women who are defined by their public place in the world of work and are therefore entitled to self-chosen gratification – 'It's about time we had books like this for women. I loved it'; 'At last. No holds barred for the female reader'; 'All women, like men, fantasize about sex. You have created what all women want and the price is just right'; and 'A chance, at last, for females to enjoy erotic fiction'. Positioned as answering the needs set up by feminist demands, then, and couched in the language of revolution and change, the Black Lace fictions work by *legitimizing* a space in which women can project their 'deepest' fantasies. But what is actually being legitimated? Why do

women feel they must have their 'own' pornography when written pornography per se is widely enough available for those women who wish to use it? Perhaps the primary value of Black Lace lies with the simple functioning of giving women 'permission' to read and use written erotica in their sexual development. However, Foucault's observation that western societies have produced discourses which construct sexuality as a force or instinct repressed by taboo and social strictures is again germane. The keystone of Black Lace is that it sets up the promise of a radical revisioning of sex and its pleasures which is destined to disappoint unless the fictions break the taboos governing existing (male) written porn. In short, Black Lace sells itself upon the avowal that it has produced *qualitatively different* pornography – precisely what legitimates it for its female readers. Undertaking the constructive project of articulating the specifically female sexuality (which has largely eluded political feminist efforts to reconstruct the heterosexual relations which currently deny women this), the new material would need to meet the criteria for an active female protagonist whose sexuality breaks free from traditional phallogentric passivity: one who is desirous, initiating, curious, controlling and self-possessed.

To offer some thoughts on whether this is achieved, Black Lace fictions can be usefully compared to dominant traditions in mass-marketed fiction aimed at women – largely, the romance – to see how the Black Lace fictions are ideologically placed in relation to the functions performed by women's genres.

## Pornography as romance for women

In many respects explicit representations of sexual acts seem to run entirely counter to the patriarchal Victorian ethos of romantic love which is considered pure because unsullied by debasing sexual desire. On an obvious level, readers of the romance who find graphic description of sex distasteful express a deeply entrenched internalization of hostility to female sexual desire. But rather less apparently, as Anne Snitow and Janice Radway have argued, even in the absence of explicit description of sex 'sexual desire is acknowledged and articulated so that every look and touch becomes an expression of a thinly disguised sexual sublimation' (cited in Lewallen, 1988: 86–7). Nonetheless, many romances, particularly contemporary updates on romantic formulas such as Mills & Boon's 'Temptations', have also responded to a perceived demand from a more sexually confident female readership for more explicit representations of sexual activity. Within these hybrid fictions, though, the principal characteristic which preserves these texts as romances is that the pornographic dimension functions within a highly circumscribed set of ideological parameters in which the 'open expression of sexual desire' is 'endorsed only if it is understood

as a sign or symptom of a previously existing love' (Radway, 1984: 170). In Black Lace fictions, however, there are countless occasions upon which sexual activity for the female protagonist is of no consequence whatsoever: sex is purely pleasure, not procreation nor romance nor marriage. Many of the plots hold together a loosely-knit picaresque journey of sexual discovery through which the female protagonist comes to define her pleasures and actively to pursue them. In this sense, readers' pleasure in identifying with a representation of female sensuality unencumbered by the ideological baggage of pregnancy, childcare, disease, work, domesticity, monogamy and the property relations of bourgeois marriage is not hard to grasp. However, as Radway argues for the readership of romance fictions, the 'escapism' (inherent in what she terms 'female-sponsored fantasies') is not simple, unproblematic enjoyment. The concept of 'escapism' seems almost to defy further analysis but I would argue that its use to describe the pleasures of the pornographic fiction indicates a major gap between women's experience of sexual pleasure and the social materiality of oppression as it works to construct women's sexuality elsewhere – in the workplace, in reproduction, in cultural production, in the domestic sphere, in education, in heterosexuality.

One significant indicator of the notion that these are ultimately fictions of surrender and abnegation of responsibility for sexual pleasure is the recurrent motif in which the female *body* is shown to be the true measure of women's desire, in which the female protagonist is shown to experience 'real' pleasure when her conscious mind initially says 'no'. It is the female body which functions autonomously from her conscious self so that being initiated into the secret pleasures of properly gendered womanliness (because heterosexual) often takes place through fantasies of a masochistic structure of sexual exchange. Narratives of power and enslavement, initiator and novice, entrapment and consensual 'coercion' inevitably conclude with the female protagonist's better 'knowledge' of a 'real' self kept from view by sexual innocence and prudery. In Foucault's sense, this trope of the overwhelmed body which 'speaks' the 'truth' of female sexual pleasure (and where the external self is constantly destabilized by the eruption of 'natural' and 'instinctive' forces of desire and lust) replays dominant cultural ideas about sexuality as existing outside of social construction. In this way, Black Lace further attests to the dislocation of women from sexuality grounded in a sense of selfhood.

The new 'post-feminist' sexuality therefore is a marker of the continued disenfranchisement of a female sexual self, a split so profound that it can be commodified and offered for consumption on the same terms that feminist analysis has criticized male pornography for its alienated view of human sexuality. Further, the 'pleasure' of a female self as a sexual self bent solely on sexual gratification is not without its 'danger' in reducing female selfhood

to a purely sexualized dimension. The gendered agenda that exhorts female sexuality to 'expression' succeeds only to tie it more firmly to the power play of gendered definitions of sexual appetite. The contradictory experience of Second Wave feminists during the 1960s and 1970s stands as a salutary warning against a simplistic notion that 'sexual liberation' (for which read sexual availability) for women is possible while other inequalities remain unchallenged. The very notion that a female heterosexuality can be 'like that of a male' – 'hedonistic, lustful, self-gratifying, and instrumental' – is caught in the contradiction of asserting a sexual self and yet of 'replicating historically well-established notions of what women should, and should not be, sexually speaking' (McNair, 1996: 101). Accordingly, a critical benchmark for assessing how far Black Lace titles have moved women's fictional genres out of this double bind is measurable in how far removed they are from the primary anti-pornography tenet – that in the context of patriarchal dominance, women's pleasure in consuming pornography must always be over-determined by an internalization of the male gaze.

Like most debates on pornography, issues around the male gaze originated and have remained almost wholly within analyses of *visual* representations in film and photography. Within its terms of analysis, it has been notoriously difficult to arrive at a theoretical construction of an *active* female gaze, lesbian or heterosexual. Perhaps this indicates why popular culture, and not feminist theorizing, has become the new site of post-feminist concern for political agency and empowerment. For real complexities of processes of sexual identification (materialized in the 'act of looking') are performed in the spaces opened by the one area where Black Lace fictions are literally visual – the front cover photos. If it is granted that 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is a measure of female sexual worth, what can be made of the cover photos for the Black Lace texts? Without exception, they feature a solitary women posed as an object to be looked at. As the initial point of narrative identification for the reader, it is peculiar that it is a *female* image which guides the female reader into scenes of heterosexual fantasy. A brief look at the top shelf in the newsagent will confirm that male porn invariably has images of women to solicit a sexualizing male gaze: gay pornography is clearly announced as such by the absence of the inviting female figure. So as heterosexual erotica, material designed for heterosexual arousal, why are there no pictures of men to solicit an equivalent sexualising female gaze on the covers of Black Lace? As evidence of the 'internalization of the male gaze', this is properly significant in signalling to the female readership the imbalance in sexual power relations which, even in fantasy, militate against an active female gaze. This is the path of passive heterosexual female desire at its most circuitous, since men are not and cannot be visually constituted as the object of desire. Even an image of a heterosexual *couple* might at least

signal the space in which female desire can actively control the fantasy scenarios on offer. Instead, readers are asked to identify with the image of a woman in her 'to-be-looked-at-ness': it is this structure of looking which determines that the female protagonist (and the experience of reading) will confirm the 'rightness' of the equation between sexuality, womanliness, passivity and receptiveness in that the biggest thrill is always to be desired, to be 'continually overwhelmed by desire' (Assiter, 1988: 104). Coded as sexually desirable, the importance of clothing, fabrics, accessories, make-up and theatrical staging of sexual encounters – in both contemporary and historical narratives – suggests the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' indicative of a female sexuality caught in the male gaze.

But is analysis condemned to rest with replicating and rehearsing such a well-worn conclusion? Do these texts thereby undermine their claims to offer a cultural space for an empowered reader in 'control' of 'her' 'own' 'sexuality'? Alison Assiter has suggested that romance fiction is a form of pornography for women in the strict sense that (heterosexual) pornography is the 'representation of the eroticization of power relations between the sexes' (Assiter, 1988: 103). Adapting her argument, I would suggest that *Black Lace* covers make it easy to mistake a male-defined sexualization of the heroine for even a partial expression of an autonomous sexual self. One counter view would be to suggest that the use of a female figure as an invitation to a woman-defined space has a markedly different function in this context than that of the photographic conventions of women's magazines: its 'very existence contradicts the view that all pornography is, by definition, patriarchal' (McNair, 1996: 101). In other words, the commercial technique for invoking 'feminine' narcissistic identification is here re-signified as both empowering and potentially subversive of both dominant sexist and anti-pornography feminist placements of heterosexual women's relationship to the domain of pornography.

## Conclusion

It is part of my larger project to investigate how erotica, written under the discourses of self and producing the position of empowered post-feminist reader, challenges the critical orthodoxies that have largely confined discussion of heterosexual female pleasure in erotica to the conventions of the internalization of the male gaze. Chiefly, these have limited visions of subversive textual practices and textual reading and reduce 'autonomous' female sexuality to the sole matter of *reversing* this power–pleasure structure: to the possibilities for women to return the male gaze, to possess the power of looking rather than being the object of the controlling look. In other words, feminist analysts concerned to measure how dominant cultural practices operate to exclude an active female gaze fail to consider that



positionings for pleasure within written erotica may invoke a multiplicity of mobile and transient subjectivities which cannot be subsumed by the uni-dimensional power structure of *gender-defined* heterosexuality. If current research by post-structuralist feminist, lesbian, gay and 'queer' theorists demonstrates the inescapably heterocentric terms of 'male gaze' theories, I would argue they are not even equipped to address the intricate negotiations of heterosexual subjectivities transacted in the act of *reading* which invokes a wholly different register of subjective positions within sexual fantasy scenarios. This moves discussion closer to the psychological dimensions of pleasure offered by women-authored erotica: the complexities of these negotiations, however, can be demonstrated only through detailed textual analysis which cannot be included here.

My last point is that while proclaiming Newness, the fictions are in many ways curiously old-fashioned in attempting to stabilize and even naturalize the connection between gender and sexuality. When most contemporary thinking on sexuality has disconnected the relationship between gender (masculine/feminine) and sexual subjectivity, the fictions can be seen to fix patriarchal heterosexuality in its demands for a unified female subject who, despite engaging in a range of what are given as 'kinky' sexual practices, leaves male/female as subject positions wholly *unchallenged*: men are men and women are women because they are made to know they are. Further, as the front covers testify, they are also constructed upon a homogenized female identity that admits little differentiation by class, culture, ethnicity, age or physical embodiment and so repeat the dominant western version of a sexually desirable woman.

This is by no means to reduce the importance of the emergence of women's erotica 'by women, for women': they are provocative in the way they take women's sexual pleasure seriously and offer popular pleasures with a view to enhancing women's understanding of the possible role of erotica in developing personal sexual practices. But I would stop short of endorsing a model of female sexuality that claims to celebrate sexual diversity and yet evacuates the ground upon which that diversity might be constructed.

In Meryl Altman's view, pornography is a medium 'through which the dominant culture, under the guise of breaking taboos, reinforces those taboos, unceasingly telling itself and its initiates what it, and they, already know' (Altman, 1992: 128). So why buy these books? A pessimistic reading would conclude with Altman:

. . . because they are explicitly about sex and therefore sexually arousing. But this function reinforces, rather than conflicts with, the normative function: sexual arousal by a text occurs by means of the reader's identification with the characters in the text, and such identification . . . facilitates the acceptance of norms. Stephen Marcus has distinguished 'pornography' from 'literature' on the

grounds that 'pornography' is obsessively repetitive, plays the same scenes over and over, so its readers can feel aroused without feeling threatened; it is thus ideologically conservative. (Altman, 1992: 128)

In this sense, it could be argued that Black Lace exemplifies a fundamental correlation between the consumption of pornography as 'obsessively repetitive' and the structure of desire and gratification underpinning the consumption of *all* commodities. This might suggest that the 'liberated' post-feminist is better read as a cipher for the sexual self bound to the repetitions of its own construction. In more overtly political terms, it is feminism which has done most to politicize heterosexual pleasure so that contemporary sexual pleasure is difficult to imagine outside of, or as an alternative to, feminist politics. In this respect, post-feminist representations of sex (and readings of them) will inevitably bear the traces of both a feminist past – which will insist that there are no spaces outside of unequal heterosexual power relations – and a contemporary desire to move beyond that impasse into a place where women's enjoyment and pleasure are paramount. It might be that the ultimate significance of the Black Lace imprint lies in the fact that it is positioned within the doubt and uncertainty around women's relation to heterosexual sexual pleasure that feminism has never really resolved. The argument is still open as to whether the current turn to 'post-feminism' culture is a *refusal* of a *politics* of sexual representation and Black Lace the popular fictional embodiment of its demise.

### Notes

My sincere thanks to Peter Stanfield for lively discussions and useful comments on drafts. This article is part of a book-length study which investigates historical and contemporary relations between women and written pornography. In other chapters, I make the close textual reading of Black Lace fictions not offered here. I am also using the concept of the *masquerade* to explore their construction of sexual fantasy scenarios, and the ways in which heterosexuality is produced through these (forthcoming).

1. This article is explicitly concerned with the contemporary repositioning of erotica within *heterosexual* post-feminism. It is important to signal that these transformations sit alongside lesbian, gay and 'queer' readings of pornography which have similarly challenged its containment within patriarchal, heterosexist and gendered culture. See for example Bright (1993), Califa (1994), Frank and Smith (1993), Gamman and Makinen (1994), Gibson and Gibson, (1993), Hardy (1997), Kimmel (1990), McNair (1996), Merck (1993), Samois (1982) and Sprinkle (1991).
2. The emergence of the New 'post-feminist' Woman in contemporary women's magazines (straight and gay) suggests a wider context for popular disengagement with feminist thinking explored here. See Sonnet and Whelehan (1995).

On the politics of 'post-feminism', see Faludi (1991), Hoff Summers (1994), Denfeld (1995) and Brooks (1997).

3. The literature on women, pornography, sexuality and feminism is now extensive. Key texts in the pro- and anti-censorship debates, however, range from seminal thinkers such as Millett (1969) who addresses literary rather than visual pornography and Greer (1971), to American anti-pornography campaigners Dworkin (1981) and MacKinnon (1987). British anti-censorship positions can be found in *Feminists Against Censorship* (1991). See also Kappeler (1986) as well as excellent collections of essays in Ellis et al. (1986), Segal and McIntosh (1992), Snitow et al. (1986), *Feminist Review* (1987) and Assiter and Avedon (1993). See also Williams (1990).
4. See Vance (1992) and her 'Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography' in Segal and McIntosh (1992: 29–49). See also Merck, 'From Minneapolis to Westminster' (1992: 50–62). Thompson (1994) uses the British context for pornography censorship to make the same point.
5. Early feminist critics of the ideology of romantic love and its relationship to patriarchal power are Millett (1969) and Greer (1971). The most fruitful study of the role played by romantic fiction in women's lives is by Radway (1984) while Pearce and Stacey's (1995) collection rethinks the automatic connection between romance and 'false consciousness' and argues for a less deterministic reading.

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